

A Railroad of Love

DAISY CREEK BRIDES BOOK 14

AMELIA ROSE

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Daisy Creek Brides, Book 14

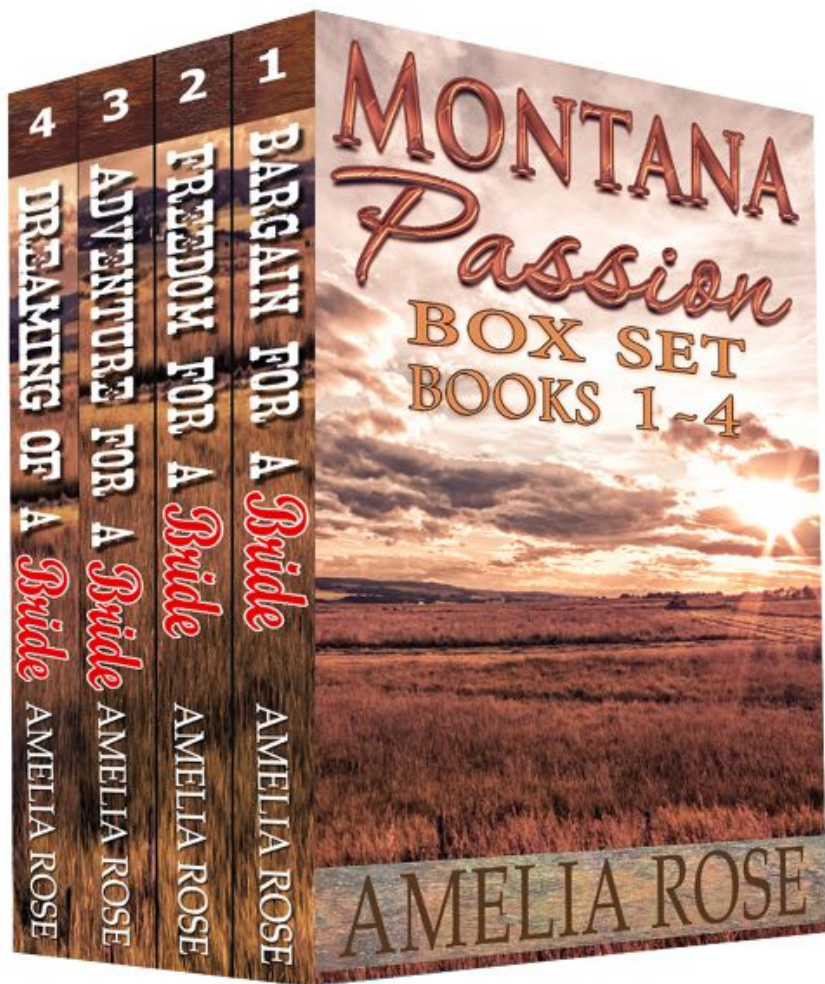
Nebraska, United States, 1895

Amelia Rose

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Dedication

Thank you for the support, reviews, love, and friendship you have shown me as we have gone through this journey together. I am truly blessed to have such a wonderful readership.

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Character List

Edward Finnegan

Susan Taylor

Frank Taylor (Susan's husband. Deceased)

Frank Junior, Nicole, & Gregory Taylor (Susan & Frank's children)

Roy & Samantha Fox (horse breeder & wife). Children: Kenneth & Miley

Landen & Clary Clayborn (restaurant and inn owners)

Bentley Clayborn (Landen's cousin)

Carter & Maisie Williams (tailor & wife). Children: Danica, Patricia, and Michael

David Barber (banker)

Joshua & Heather Tayden (mayor & wife). Children: Mateo

Danny & Gina Hooten (sheriff & town doctor). Children: Brenda

John & Mary McBee (pastor & wife). Children: Phoebe

Christopher & Leann Wilkinson (general store owner & wife). Children: Charles

Chatan (Lakota chief)

Akecheta & Wambleeska (Chatan's sons)

Marty (groom at the livery stables)

Donaven Adams (owner of the Union Pacific Railroad)

Bill & Jill Paulson (deputy & wife). Children: Henry, Margret, and Mila

Malcome Dalton (rancher)

Various families, ranchers, homesteaders

Chapter One

Edward Finnegan took a deep breath and exhaled gradually before he pulled open the door to the mayor's office. He was ready to get to work and would need to make a connection with Joshua Tayden to get the ball rolling. Intending to keep the meeting as short as possible, Edward reminded himself of the real reason he was there: to make a name for himself.

The mayor's office in Daisy Creek, Nebraska, represented the remote town perfectly. It was a small four-walled building made from pine that had been whitewashed to give it some personality. Yellow drapes hung over the windowpanes, a color that did not match the white walls very well. On each side of the window, there was a navy blue armchair. They were clearly there for anyone who needed to wait for the mayor. But Edward was not going to wait. He made a left through the open doorway and approached the oak desk.

"Good morning, Mr. Tayden," Edward said in greeting, coming to stand at the front of the desk. He folded his hands in front of him and looked down his Roman nose at the older man.

The mayor looked up and set the letter he'd been reading aside. His blue eyes focused on Edward, and he ran his fingers through his golden hair, clearly puzzled by who he was. Edward inwardly smiled, enjoying this moment of having the upper hand. It always gave him a thrill to know more than the person he was talking to.

"Good morning, sir. How may I assist you?" Mr. Tayden asked, gesturing to the wooden chair in front of the desk.

Though Edward didn't want to remain long, he obliged the man by taking a seat. He then adjusted his leather vest over his muslin shirt. As he smoothed it down, his eyes darted to the bookshelf to the left. He was impressed by the titles he saw. But then his dark brown eyes focused on the mayor once more.

"I am Edward Finnegan. I rode into town not an hour ago and have settled at the inn. I trust the Union Pacific Railroad made you aware of my arrival?"

Edward saw the mayor's eyes grow large and dart to the letter before him.

"I was just reading their letter," Mr. Tayden admitted. "Goes to show you how slow the post can be."

When the mayor chuckled, Edward remained silent. He folded his

arms and leaned back in the chair, ready to get down to business.

"I'll be staying in town for two weeks while I conduct my survey. After I've prepared my report, I'll return to the railroad headquarters in Omaha. Then the company will make their decision," Edward stated plainly. "During my survey, I request no interference. I don't want to be approached and questioned or convinced the railroad needs to come to Daisy Creek. You've already made that clear in your constant letters."

Mr. Tayden chuckled and nodded. He set the letter from the railroad company aside and propped one knee over the other, casually resting both hands on it as though they were old friends.

"I've been writing to various railroad companies for almost a decade now, trying to convince one of them to build a line through Daisy Creek. Lincoln is the closest railway station for us country folk, and that's a three-hour ride. But no one can doubt that Daisy Creek has really changed over the years. Lots of traffic is coming through town now."

"That's why I'm here," Edward stated, a smile coming to his lips. He couldn't help but feel proud of that. He was representing an entire railroad company. If the mayor had known about his childhood, he'd have been surprised to find a man like him in such an important position.

"Please let me know if there is anything I can do to make your stay here in Daisy Creek more comfortable, but I will respect your request not to interfere. As for others, I can't really control everyone's actions. I'm sure you'll get the opportunity to meet some of the locals once word gets around you're here, and why. It's a close-knit community."

"Fair enough," Edward replied with a shrug. "I hear that there are Indians in the area?"

Mr. Tayden gave a quick nod. "They're as much a part of this community as I am. The Lakota are a very friendly people, and most of them have adapted to our way of life. Almost every Indian speaks English, and many of them trade with the locals. Different businesses have hired Indians as employees, and some of them have built homes for themselves. You'll even find that our two communities have started to blend. Just last year, the future chief of the tribe married a white woman."

Edward raised an eyebrow at that. He'd never heard of such a thing. Most authority figures complained about Indians. This mayor seemed to be singing their praises.

"I'm sure it's for the overall good. Most Indians have been herded onto reservations like cattle. I'm surprised this group of Indians hasn't met the same fate," Edward said.

"That's because they act more like extended family than warring savages," Mr. Tayden said with much weight on his words. The mayor narrowed his eyes at Edward as though testing to see where he stood in the great debate about Indians. Edward just shrugged again, never willing to give too much away.

"I'll be out of your hair in two weeks, Mr. Tayden," Edward repeated. He uncrossed his arms and got to his feet. "Union Pacific Railroad will make the final decision."

"I'm glad you're finally here," Mr. Tayden said. He stood up and shook hands with Edward. "You take care."

"I thank you kindly," Edward said in parting.

He left the building the same way he had entered. Letting out a deep breath, he stepped outside into the cool weather of the fading winter. The air still nipped at his nose, but he welcomed it every time he went outside. The cool air always seemed to help him keep his calm. Appearances were everything, and he felt he had made a pretty good impression on Mr. Tayden.

Wanting to see what the local general store had to offer, Edward walked down the boardwalk, heading south through the town. Daisy Creek wasn't anything like Omaha. Its one road came in from the north, curved through the town, and headed south before it forked and went either east to Lincoln or west toward the river that parted the state down the middle.

Edward could count the number of local businesses on both hands. It was like one street in Omaha in comparison. Down from the small building the mayor used as his office, Edward passed a schoolhouse and a church, then reached the general store. The large porch of the store seemed to be more like a gathering place than a way to stay out of the sun. A good number of people had congregated there despite the cold weather.

Just like the mayor's office, this building was made from whitewashed pine. The same style could be seen in most of the town's other buildings, showing how old the town was. The only buildings that looked different were the bank, obviously owned by a wealthy man, and the large inn that had been built a few years ago and wouldn't have looked out of place in Omaha.

When he stepped onto the porch of the general store, he caught quite

a few looks. No doubt they were curious who the new man in town was. Dressed in his gray suit pants, muslin shirt, and dark leather vest, he stood out among the cowboys in their jeans and cotton shirts. Edward dressed in a very particular way to stand apart from the rest. It was all a part of his persona and master plan to raise his status.

Edward made his way through the crowd and finally entered the general store to see that it was just as busy on the inside. He took a quick look around and noticed the long wooden counter where a short line of locals was already forming. They all seemed eager to make their purchases and get on with their day. A few looked his way.

Taking the first aisle to his left, he walked with his hands in his pockets, his eyes roaming over the goods. They were all simple in nature, and there was just one brand for each item. Flour. Sugar. Canned food. Potatoes that looked ready to be planted in the ground. Spools of rope hanging on hooks on the wall. Bolts of fabric standing upright in a wooden barrel in the corner. It was certainly a mishmash of items, including a little of everything. Even a brand-new saddle with a large price tag strung around the horn was proudly on display.

They don't call it a general store for nothing, Edward thought to himself as he went up another aisle. There was a small collection of personal items including lavender-scented soap. Nothing that he was particularly interested in, but it was good to get a basic idea of what the little town could offer. If Daisy Creek did become the next train depot for the Union Pacific Railroad, it would need different types of stores to meet travelers' needs.

Thinking it was time to take his leave, Edward exited the aisle and turned his eyes to the front door. Someone was coming toward him, so he stopped and stepped out of the way. But the moment he did that, he collided with something. There was a soft cry as the figure hit the ground, their purchases scattering all over the floor. He looked down and saw that he'd just knocked a woman off her feet. A woman more beautiful than anyone he'd ever seen before.

~*~

Susan Taylor sat on the driver's bench of the wagon, her hands clutching onto the leather reins. The old mare lowered its head and started munching on the cold grass that had started to sprout along the dirt road. With her eyes focused on the schoolhouse, where she'd just left her three children, Susan tried to keep the tears back. She took several deep breaths to calm her nerves, watching her breath rise in the air like steam. It was late February, and the days were still cold. She dearly wanted to be warm again instead of constantly feeling as

though she would freeze to death. There hadn't been enough money to purchase proper clothing for herself—just enough for scraps to patch together decent clothes for the children.

"It's going to be okay. We'll survive this, just like everything else," Susan told herself. "Things will no doubt be better after the move." She flicked the reins, and the mare took a few steps forward. The horse didn't seem happy about the idea of moving and took her time, but Susan needed to make a quick stop at the general store before heading back to the farm. There was too much to do for her to just sit there and stare at the schoolhouse, wishing things could be different.

The general store was quite busy for a Thursday morning. There were so many other wagons parked out front that Susan had to find a spot along the far side of the building. She pulled the mare to a stop, jammed the wheel wedge in place, and hopped down from the driver's bench, pulling her shawl tighter around her. She shivered as she made her way to the front of the general store, hoping to get in and out as fast as she could.

After stepping around everyone on the porch, giving a few nods as she went along, she finally made it to the front door. The warmth of the interior gave her a small moment of relief now that she was out of the elements of the winter still lingering outside.

"Howdy there, Susan!" Leann called from behind the counter. Her son was sitting on top of the counter, fussing with a piece of writing paper.

"Hey, Leann," Susan called back. She waved, then headed down one of the aisles. She knew how much the shopkeeper's wife could talk, so she wasn't going to take any chances.

She hurried down each aisle, grabbing the few things she needed before she took off in a week. Susan wanted to get back to the farm as quickly as she could. There was packing to do, and the buyer was coming in the morning. She had to make things as presentable as possible.

"This all you're getting today?" Leann asked when Susan got to the counter. She set Charles down, and he walked off to show his father the paper boat he had made.

"All I need," Susan replied, looking down at the bags of flour and sugar she had put on the counter. She planned to make biscuits in preparation for the trip to Omaha. As long as their bellies were filled, that was all that mattered. Sweet biscuits would keep the kids from complaining too much until they could afford some real food.

“Well, you just consider it on the house then,” Leann said, lowering her voice. “I know you haven’t been doing too well since your husband passed away. Why don’t you take home some potatoes, too? They’re starting to sprout anyway. Nothing good to do with them but plant them.”

“Are you sure?” Susan asked, feeling her heart tighten in her chest. She hadn’t been expecting any handouts.

“Most certainly,” Leann said with a sharp nod that caused her golden locks to bounce around her perfect face. “There is a bag of dried apples sitting on the shelf all alone. You just take that, too. And the salted meat next to it. I don’t think anyone is going to buy them anyway.”

“Thank you,” Susan said softly, tears pricking at her eyes again.

“Think nothing of it. You take this old flour sack, go grab what you need, and get home before it gets much colder out there. I fear it’s going to snow again before it finally lets up,” Leann said.

Susan couldn’t think of anything else to do but nod her head. Tears were blurring her vision as she went down the aisle once more to collect some potatoes and the things Leann had mentioned. They would surely help get them through the week. There was no way that Leann could know how much this meant to her. Wanting to get out of the store and get home, she started toward the door.

As she exited, Susan didn’t realize that someone was coming in or that the tall figure in front of her was trying to get out of the way, and she collided with the man. She lost her balance and tossed her flour sack to the ground so she could have both hands to break her fall. Her things scattered everywhere, making her stomach tighten with shame.

“Miss, I am so terribly sorry,” said the tall figure as he scrambled to collect her things and put them back in the sack. Susan could hear murmuring around her, making her think the other patrons were talking about her. But when she looked up at the tall figure while dusting off her cotton dress, she understood they weren’t talking about her.

Before her stood a very handsome man in tailored gray suit pants, a fitted vest, and a muslin shirt that must have cost more than Susan’s entire wardrobe. It was peculiar; she didn’t understand how he could manage the cold in such clothing. As he handed her the sack, she realized she’d never seen this man before.

“I’m awfully clumsy,” Susan confessed as she looked into his dark brown eyes. “Thank you for collecting my things.” She tucked a loose

strand of her brown hair behind an ear, hoping she didn't look too disheveled.

"It is I who should apologize, miss. I wasn't looking when I moved aside for the door," he said, putting his hands in his pockets. "Let me make it up to you. I hear that the restaurant in town serves great food, and I was thinking an early lunch would do me good."

Susan was speechless. She didn't know this man, but he was inviting her to have a meal with him? There was certainly no way she could accept his proposal.

"There is really no need. I must get home—" she began.

"Please, I insist," he was quick to interrupt. "My mother would roll over in her grave knowing that I didn't make it up to a woman who I had trampled to the floor."

"You didn't trample me." A smile came to her lips. "It was just a small accident." However, the longer she stood there, the more she could feel her right hip becoming quite sore. She couldn't afford to get hurt now.

"I'm new in town and could use some advice on where to start my work. Perhaps you'd be willing to help me learn more about Daisy Creek? In return, I will provide a meal for us," the man said.

That certainly got Susan's attention. Looking at his clothes again, she guessed he must be some sort of businessman. If he was planning to start a new business in Daisy Creek, perhaps this was the miracle she had been praying for.

"Very well, then. Let me put my things in my wagon, and I'll join you for a short lunch." She stepped past him and out the door. The man followed her, clearly surprised by how fast she could move.

Chapter Two

With every moment that passed, Edward became more and more interested in the woman across the table from him. He'd been surprised by how quickly she had moved once she'd accepted his offer, and he'd had to work hard to keep up with her. He hadn't had to do that since he'd first started chasing a job with the railroad company.

Now, as they sat across from each other at a large wooden table, he was doing his best to get his mind wrapped around this woman. She didn't have a ring on her finger, but she appeared to be in a hurry to do something with what she'd purchased from the general store. Daisy Creek seemed too small to be the type of place where anything was done quickly.

"My name is Edward Finnegan, by the way. I suppose I should have told you that back at the general store," he said, folding his hands and leaning forward. He smiled at her, but she seemed unaffected by his smile. Her blue eyes were searching his face for some sort of answer. To what question, he did not know.

"Mrs. Susan Taylor," she replied with a nod. She leaned back and folded her arms over her chest, looking even more guarded.

"Missus?" he questioned. "I did not think you were married. There is no ring on your finger."

"My husband passed away two years ago," she explained. "I ended up selling the ring to cover some expenses for my farm. I'm sure Frank didn't appreciate it, but I do what I must to stay afloat these days."

"I'm sorry to hear about your troubles." Edward frowned, wondering if he'd been pulled into some sort of trouble himself. He hadn't assumed that Susan was an actual damsel in distress; he thought he merely should smooth things over given their very public encounter. But perhaps he had been wrong. He always let his guard down too quickly for a pretty face.

Susan shrugged in response. "Nothing I can do about it at the moment. I'm preparing to change my life and the lives of my three children. I do what I can to survive."

"And what is your plan now that your husband has passed away?" he couldn't help but ask.

"I need to make an income for my children. Daisy Creek is a good place for farms and ranches. The community here is by far the best in

the country, but there aren't enough jobs to go around. Not like in a big city like Omaha," she explained. "I reckon some rooms in the city and a good job will be better than what I'm trying to piece together now."

Edward was surprised by Susan's words. He couldn't help but think of his mother, who had often told him stories of the room his parents had rented in a house full of other Irish immigrants. They both worked jobs while he was at school. In the evenings, it was his responsibility to do his schoolwork and keep their room cleaned. It was often late when his father returned, right before Edward fell asleep.

Edward forced himself to pull away from those old memories and the stories his mother had told him of how it was hard for the small family to survive when he was first born. He wouldn't wish that lifestyle on anyone. And as he stared at Susan, he felt a need to help her and her children avoid such a life.

"I've lived in Omaha for many years," Edward said. He picked up his mug of coffee and took a long sip. "It's a busy place. And very crowded."

"There must be a *something* that keeps you there. Or are you planning on making the move here? I've seen plenty of new businesses pop up in town over the years," she said, reaching for her cup of coffee.

He raised an eyebrow, thinking that she was trying to learn as much about him as he was trying to piece together about her.

"I'm in town for two weeks," he stated plainly. "I was sent by the Union Pacific Railroad to survey the town and the surrounding land to see if it would be a good investment for the railroad to make a line here and create a depot."

He saw the surprise cross Susan's face for just a moment. Then her eyes became focused, and her jaw tightened. She was very good at composing herself in a blink of an eye. A trait he had spent years perfecting himself.

"That would certainly change things for this town. Daisy Creek has received an increase in visitors over the years. Roy Fox's annual horse race brings in a lot of folks, as does the fall festival. The inn is a nice place for people to stay, and Parker's saloon is the finest you'll find in the country. He has a two-drink limit that ensures the peace."

"You lived here all your life?" he asked.

She nodded, a hint of a smile creeping onto her round face. Her

features reminded him of a southern belle.

"Born and raised in Daisy Creek. So was my dear Frank. We were like two peas in a pod, marrying when we were both seventeen."

"Then you'd certainly be able to provide me with details about the area. I could use a secretary, and there would be decent pay involved," he offered, a plan forming quickly in his mind. It was very hard not to smile when he saw her eyes widen.

"I could use a temporary job," she said. "I can read and write. I'm quite organized. I'm sure I would fit the bill."

"Good. You can start tomorrow. We'll meet at the inn and go over the agenda for the days, and I'll have you transcribe my notes as they come to mind," he explained.

"Sounds like a deal, Mr. Finnegan."

"Please, call me Edward," he said in a firm voice. "Mr. Finnegan was my father, and I feel that title belongs with him until I marry."

"I'm surprised you're not already married," she said, her smile returning. "A man such as yourself would be a hot commodity for any woman, if I do say so myself."

Edward couldn't help but chuckle. The waiter came to serve their food, meatloaf with mashed potatoes and a small crock of chili. It wasn't the type of food he normally ate when he dined in restaurants, but this was clearly a country place. He wasn't going to find fine pieces of fish served over a bed of garden salad in the winter. He would have to make do with what was on offer for the time being.

"What happened to your husband, if you don't mind me asking?" Edward asked as they began to eat.

"It was a mixture of things," she said between bites of mashed potatoes. "He was injured by our mare. She kicked him, breaking a few ribs. He had a hard time recovering while still working on the farm. Then he got ill. The sickness took him in less than a week."

"I'm terribly sorry to hear that," he said with every bit of honesty he had in his bones. "Both of my parents died from the flu when I was twelve. I can't imagine what that must have been like for you and your children."

"I can't imagine being on my own from such a young age. My eldest is twelve and a very bright boy. But I can't picture him on his own."

Edward did a quick calculation in his head, something that he was quite good at. He estimated that Susan was about thirty years old, if

not a few years older.

"I became a street rat," he said with a chuckle. "No one hustled more newspapers than me. When I came of age, I found out what company was making the most money. Railroads were the clear answer based on all the articles in the papers. I eventually landed this position with the railroad and have gone on to survey a lot of towns."

"Do all the towns you survey become train depots?" she asked.

He shook his head as he finished chewing. "Rarely," he replied. "But I don't mind being paid to live in a nice inn for a few weeks. Every four weeks, I'm off to somewhere new."

"Explains why you haven't married yet. You're gone too often," she teased.

He smiled at the truth of her statement. "Or perhaps I just haven't met the right woman," he said with a shrug. "You know, this food isn't all that bad."

"It's some of the best I've had," she said firmly. "I consider myself to be a decent cook, but the Clayborns always outdo themselves. They even cook Indian dishes from time to time since the Lakota dine here as well."

"Is that so? I've heard about the local Indians being quite civilized, but I'll have to see it to believe it."

"Friday night at the saloon is bound to teach you all sorts of things about this town. You should take the opportunity to head there tomorrow night for your research," she suggested.

"Does that mean you'll join me?" he asked, the smile on his face fully developing as he found a way to tease her back.

"No," she said firmly, causing his smile to quickly disappear. "I don't want people to get ideas. This is a small town. People talk. I need to keep my reputation before I make the move to Omaha. I've got my buyer coming tomorrow."

"But you'll stay long enough to help me, right?" he asked, his business persona returning quickly.

"That's right," she said with a nod. "I'll help you, earn a bit of coin, then take my family north to more possibilities."

Unless, of course, a railroad is developed in Daisy Creek, Edward thought to himself. For the time being, though, he kept that thought to himself. He felt he had learned enough about Susan for the moment. Enough to know he could trust her. Desperate people were often the

easiest to trust; they didn't have anything to hide.

"Sounds like a plan for now," Edward said as he finished eating. He reached into the inner pocket of his vest, pulled out his wallet, and pulled out two bills that he then placed on the table. All the while, he watched for Susan's reaction to his having a wallet full of cash. Her expression was as cool as ever. "Tomorrow morning, nine a.m.," he said as he stood.

"See you tomorrow," she replied with a nod.

He returned the gesture before strolling out of the restaurant. He wanted to look over his shoulder and see if Susan was watching him. Or was she reaching for the money since he had paid twice what the bill should be? But when he opened the door and peeked behind him, she had her eyes on her plate as she finished her food.

~*~

"Susan, who was that fellow?" Landen Clayborn asked when he came out of the kitchen to collect the empty plates. "Never seen him around these parts before."

"He's a surveyor for the Union Pacific Railroad. I literally bumped into him at the general store, and he offered to pay for lunch since I took quite a fall. Embarrassing, it was," she explained. "He left you quite a tip, too."

"Next time you and the children are in town, stop by for a meal then," he offered. "How is Frank Junior doing? He was getting pretty tall the last time I saw him."

"As tall as me now," she said, chuckling. "He's been a real help around the farm after school. All the children have."

"They're good kids. My little one is a terror. Now that he's learned to walk, he's all over the place. I have to keep a close eye on the stove, the knives, and the pots and pans."

Susan couldn't help but laugh openly. "Yes, children will do that," she said through her mirth. "Just wait until Clary has another. Once you have your own little herd, things change real fast."

"I'll sure keep that in mind. You take care now," he said before heading back into the kitchen where his cousin, Bentley, did most of the cooking. Landen was more the face of the restaurant. Both cousins had married and started families of their own, filling the restaurant with plenty of laughter in the evenings when the little ones toddled all over the place.

Susan took her leave, pleased that her stomach was full for the first time in weeks. She always ensured that the children had plenty to eat but often went hungry at night herself. It was worth the pain for the sake of the children, and now that she'd had a decent meal, she'd be stronger than ever.

When she stepped back out into the cold, Susan shivered. She untethered the aging mare from the hitching post, praying the horse would last long enough for them to make it to Omaha. Once she was seated on the driver's bench of the wagon, she pulled the wedge from the wheel and began her way to the farm. She had a few hours to get the farmhouse cleaned up before she needed to pick up the children from school. She had to use every moment of her time wisely to accomplish her tasks.

While pulling her shawl tighter around her shoulders and wishing she had a proper coat, Susan couldn't help but think about Edward Finnegan. As she had expected, he was in town for business, but not his own. As he was representing the railroad company, he had to be a pretty important man. Based on the number of bills in his wallet it was clear that he was also wealthy. She had been lucky to bump into him and land the position of his secretary. She hadn't even discussed what her rate would be, but she knew that it would be better than the nothing she was currently earning.

Last fall's crop had been a disaster. An early frost had all but destroyed the wheat she'd been growing. Since she didn't have any hired help, it was just her and the children to cut and get the grain bagged before the cold killed most of it. The quality had been very poor, making it hard for her to sell. The money hadn't even been enough to repair the barn that housed the mare and the farm equipment. The fact that the mare was still alive despite another harsh winter was a complete surprise to her.

After all she'd been through, she realized that she couldn't maintain the farm on her own, and had decided to sell it. It would fetch enough to pay back the loan she had needed to take to get through the winter. She needed food on the table and plenty of fuel to keep the house warm. A small loan had afforded her that. But now that winter was coming to an end, she had no means to pay it back besides selling her last asset—the farm.

Did she want to sell the farm? Absolutely not. It had been her and Frank's dream to grow wheat, have a small herd of cattle, and raise a large family. They had been talking about trying for more children before he had been injured. She didn't want to give up on their dream but saw no other way.

As she continued home, she tried very hard not to cry again. She would find a way for her family to survive in Omaha. She would find a good job and earn enough to provide her children with a good life. Her time with Mr. Finnegan could lead to a reference that might land her a permanent job. It seemed like this random meeting was the small miracle she had been looking for all along.

Chapter Three

Edward glanced at the grandfather clock in the corner of the dining room. It was a few minutes before nine o'clock, and he was starting to wonder if Susan was going to show. He'd spent the remainder of his first day in town making notes in his journal while being distracted by the image of her in his mind. He never approved of distractions, but he had to admit that this particular one was interesting. He'd seen the fire in the eyes of Susan Taylor and wanted to learn more about what that fire could mean.

As he raised a porcelain cup of Earl Grey tea to his lips, he heard the doors to the inn suddenly swing open. Susan came walking in, her face flushed and her eyes darting around to find him. When their eyes met, he shivered despite the warmth of the room. There was that fire again. Her jaw was set hard in a look of pure determination. She strolled toward him and took a seat next to him at the square table with a light sigh.

"True to my word, Mr. Finnegan. Here by nine in the morning," she said, resting her hands on the white tablecloth.

"Thank you for coming," he said. He placed his teacup on its saucer. "Would you like something to drink? And do call me Edward."

"No, thank you, Edward. Perhaps later," she replied with a hint of a smile on her lips. "I'm curious to learn more about what work you have planned for today."

"I need a better view of the layout of the town and the surrounding area. I only arrived yesterday morning, so I think that a ride will help me discover what I need to know. You can be my guide, and I can make a detailed map over lunch," he explained.

"Sounds easy enough," she replied with a nod. "Your horse at the livery stables?"

"Indeed," he replied. He finished his cup of tea. "The air seemed brisk when I took my initial walk on the street earlier. Let me fetch my coat. Where is yours?"

"I'm perfectly fine," she said with a forced smile. She stood from the table as though eager to head back out into the cold.

"Susan, you must learn something dreadfully true about me," he said as he also pushed back from the table. "I have a keen ability to know when someone is lying."

His words had a clear effect on Susan. The smile slipped from her face,

and that look of determination returned as she raised her chin. Edward found the look rather sweet and had to try hard not to laugh. Instead, he returned the expression.

When she didn't say anything, he continued. "If you're going to be my assistant, I will need complete honesty. I believe the first order of business this morning is ensuring you have a proper coat."

"That's not necessary," she was quick to say, her face turning a deep shade of red. He knew instantly that he had embarrassed her. He often enjoyed embarrassing women, but this was not one of those times.

"This topic is not up for debate. If I remember correctly, I saw a sign for a tailor earlier. You will show me the shop and introduce me to the owners," he said sternly.

He looked down at her from the bridge of his hawk nose, then walked out of the dining room. He didn't look back to see her reaction, knowing he shouldn't care. Establishing authority was part of his method. Though he had a desire to help Susan, he wouldn't allow himself to be swayed by her words. He was in charge, and that was how he liked things.

Once he had pulled his black woolen coat over his white button-up shirt and black leather vest, he returned to the lobby of the inn to find Susan standing by the front door with her arms crossed. She didn't look particularly pleased, and her lips were pressed together in a thin line.

"Ladies first," he offered, gesturing at the front door with his open palm.

She huffed as she pushed open the door and stepped outside. Edward followed. The day was cold, there was no doubt about that, and he wouldn't back down from purchasing her a proper coat. He couldn't risk her getting sick during her employment with him. After what had happened to her husband, he'd feel terrible knowing he'd caused her any harm or illness.

"The tailor's shop is owned by Carter Williams. He is much loved here in town because of his good designs and quality fabrics," Susan explained as they walked down the boardwalk. "He is married to Maisie, a talented woman in her own right. Their two daughters are Danica and Patricia, and they also have a son named Michael. They use a sewing machine to produce their clothing."

"Not many small-town tailors use a sewing machine," Edward commented. He was walking carefully to avoid stepping in the horse dung that seemed just as plentiful as in Omaha.

"The town is lucky to have Carter. He came all the way from Texas to start his business. It's been quite successful," she said as they walked up onto the porch of the building.

The structure seemed fairly new from what Edward could see of it. His eyes went over every aspect of the exterior of the building, looking for signs of wear and tear, but he found none. He followed Susan, eager to discover what the inside looked like. Warm air surrounded him as he pulled the door closed behind him, convincing him to shrug off his coat.

"Welcome," said a woman from behind the counter. She stood up from the wooden stool she'd been sitting on, closed the ledger she'd been writing in, and came around the counter to face them. "Susan, it is always good to see you. How are your little ones doing?"

"Well, thank you," Susan replied. "Maisie, may I introduce you to Edward Finnegan? He is a surveyor for the Union Pacific Railroad."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Finnegan," Maisie said, turning her eyes to Edward.

"Likewise," Edward replied with a curt nod.

The sound of footsteps tramping down the back hallway caught his attention. A boy about four years old came scurrying into the shop, a grown man running after him.

"Come now, Michael. I need those bobbins," the man said. He came to a stop, put his hands on his hips, and looked down at the little boy, who was now hiding behind his mother's skirts.

"Michael, don't be taking your father's bobbins again. They are not tin soldiers. They are parts to the sewing machine," Maisie scolded her son.

The boy looked down at the ground in shame as he stepped out from behind his mother. He reached into the pocket of his trousers and produced the bobbins. His father accepted them, then ruffled the boy's hair.

"Frank Junior used to do the same thing with the buckets his father used to haul water from the creek," Susan said with a real smile on her face for a change. "Frank used to have to go searching all over the farm for them. Frank Junior set them up over the property to be sentinels."

"See? Michael is not the only one," Maisie said pointedly. "I'll keep him up here for a bit while you get back to work."

“Thank you, dear,” Carter said. He leaned over and kissed his wife on the cheek before disappearing back down the hallway.

“Well, young man. Onto the stool with you,” Maisie ordered her son. The boy went without a word. “Now then, what can I do for you, Mr. Finnegan?”

“I would like to know if you and your husband have any business plans in the event that a train depot is built near town. With a sudden influx of customers, perhaps travelers who need a shirt repaired or replaced, how would this shop handle that?” he explained. He folded his coat and hung it on his arm.

Maisie smiled at Edward, but he could tell that the question was a troubling one by the way her smile didn’t quite reach her eyes. She folded her hands in front of her as her mind raced to come up with an answer.

“Upstairs is a good-sized set of rooms. They’re currently used to store bolts of fabric that are out of season. I use that space to keep an eye on the children when they are home from school, and for Michael, of course. I can get a good bit of hand stitching done up there as well while Carter tends to the customers.

“That space could potentially be transformed into a better workspace. We could hire two other tailors or seamstresses to meet a sudden demand for repairs or replacement clothing for travelers. We always try to keep a good stock of the most common items for every season.”

“Like coats?” he asked, glancing at Susan for a moment. She had wandered over to the rack of pre-made gowns and was flipping through them.

“Yes, sir,” the seamstress replied with a nod. “Coats for the entire family. Along with mittens, wool and fur caps, scarves, and thick stockings for both men and women. Long stockings are perfect for traveling during the colder months.”

“I believe the railroad company will find great interest in your business for potential travelers, he said with confidence. Right now, however, I would like to purchase a woman’s coat and leather gloves that would be good for riding.”

“Right away, Mr. Finnegan,” the woman said with a nod.

He watched the woman go to the rack next to the door and thumb through the winter coats. She pulled one out, and he thought it must be the nicest coat available. It was a beautiful emerald color and had intricate stitching of silver along the hem. With a matching pair of

leather gloves that had been dyed dark green, he thought it was a perfect set.

As she came back to the counter, he pulled out his wallet. He paid promptly for the items she then packaged up for him. He didn't tell her the packaging was not needed as it was all a part of his plan. He winked at the boy sitting quietly on the stool, who immediately cheered up and started to make silly faces in return.

"For Heaven's sake, Michael. Don't be making such faces," Maisie exclaimed when she caught sight of him.

"Don't worry. I am quite sure I started it," Edward confessed with a smile. "Have a splendid day."

"You as well, Mr. Finnegan. Let us know if you need anything else during your stay in town," Maisie said. "Thank you for showing him the way over, Susan."

"Of course," Susan replied before following Edward out of the store.

He passed the package to her and pulled on his coat. "She seemed like a nice woman," he commented as they stood together on the porch.

"You'll find that almost everyone in town is nice," Susan said.

"Makes me wonder why anyone would want to leave such a place," he mused as they started to make their way back across the road. This time, they were heading toward the livery stables.

Susan didn't say anything. When they reached the stables on the far side of town, Edward took the package from her and unwrapped it so she could have the coat and gloves. She remained silent as she slipped them on. By the time she was done, Edward was confident he had made the right choice. She already looked better as she secured the hood around her hair. He couldn't help but smile.

"What is it?" she asked, narrowing her eyes.

"It suits you, is all," he said, reminding himself once more to remain composed. He tossed the packaging into one of the dung bins before summoning a groom to collect their horses. "Now, what can you tell me about the area surrounding Daisy Creek? The town is quite clear and direct, but there must be more to this community than just shops."

"You're right," Susan replied. She turned her eyes toward the groom who was bringing her horse from a stall. Edward took one look at the beast and knew it was old. Not the most reliable horse, that was certain. Her mane was faded and streaked with white, and her ankles

were knobby.

“The town is surrounded by farmland, ranches, and homesteads. Everyone works together for the common good, growing and raising what the town needs. We all meet and discuss what crops will be grown by whom each year to ensure survival. The next meeting for the farmers and ranchers will be in about two weeks.”

“What would you have grown this year had you been staying in town?” he asked as another groom brought out his stallion. It was an elegant animal, fast and able to go the distance when Edward was in a hurry. It represented wealth and power. The railroad company had supplied it, so he needed to treat it better than his own body.

“Alfalfa. Easy to grow and tolerant to the cold. I would have started planting a month ago when the snow melted, and the ground softened,” she replied, pulling herself up into the saddle of her horse. Edward saw the mare take a few steps back as though unable to bear the weight. But eventually she stabilized and started following commands.

“I would like to start north and make our way around the perimeter of the town. In addition, I want to understand how close the Indian camp is,” he said as he pulled himself up onto the stallion.

“Follow me,” Susan said. She flicked the leather reins once and coaxed her mare out into the open.

Edward did as told, wondering what else he would discover through Susan’s guidance. Knowing she would be safe from the elements now with her new coat, he felt more assured that he was doing the right thing by hiring her as his secretary. Now she had the opportunity to prove herself useful to him.

Chapter Four

Susan could not deny that she felt warmer than she had all winter. It was almost as if she could relax as she rode alongside Edward, telling him the history she knew of the town while pointing out the boundaries of what she considered as being Daisy Creek. For each property they passed, she gave a detailed description of the family, their source of income, and how well off they were. It made a pleasant change from the busy morning she'd already had.

Before she'd met Edward, the buyer of the farm had come bright and early to do a quick survey. She had been in communication with him for two months. He was from Lincoln and wanted his own place. He seemed pleased with everything he saw and offered her a deposit. Having a hundred dollars in cash had been a great reassurance.

"I'll be back in two weeks to sign the deed to the property. I understand you'll be in Omaha by then?" the young man had said.

"Actually, I was just given a temporary working position. I'll still be in town, but the children and I will have moved to the inn. We'll be out of your hair by the time you come back," she explained.

"That sounds like a good plan. I'll be back to sign the deed and pay you the remainder then," he said with confidence. "You all take care. I'll see you later."

After that heartbreaking moment, she'd had to rush to get the children ready for school, ensuring they all had decent lunches to take with them. She hated to think she'd just sold the farm, but she knew it was going to a good young man. He seemed eager to prove himself in the world and could see potential for the farm that she could no longer glimpse.

"Whereabouts do you live?" Edward asked as they headed west toward the Indian camp.

"Not too far from here. South down the lane there, and then to the right," she explained. "I have a small cabin there I had hoped to expand upon now that the children are getting older and like to have their own privacy. Especially my daughter, Nicole. She's really needing her privacy."

"I can understand that after being cooped up all winter. I did not show my face outside my rooms for most of the winter myself. This is my first assignment since the roads have cleared up," he said.

She was surprised how easily he was willing to talk about himself now

that they were away from prying eyes. It was like he was a different man. She'd seen how serious he could be, much like David Barber was when he was managing the terms of a bank loan. Everyone knew David was a hard man to deal with, but he'd softened considerably after he'd married and had a family of his own. Now it seemed that Edward Finnegan was the new businessman in town that could cause people to shiver. Except he didn't seem to be so cold when it was just the two of them.

"The Indian camp is just off the road here. That lane will lead you to it. There are a few Indian families that have regular homes in the area, but most still live in teepees," she explained, trying to change the conversation and return to the business they needed to complete.

"What do you think would happen if we rode into their camp?" he asked, pulling his beautiful black stallion to a stop at the head of the trail.

"They'd probably try to trade for your horse by offering you one of their maidens," she said with a chuckle. "Only Roy Fox has horses so fine."

"It's not mine to trade," he said. "Just a loan from the railroad company. But they are a friendly people?"

"Most certainly. I've been to camp a few times myself to do a bit of trading."

She remembered the first time she'd gone and the tremendous fear she had felt. With no money left, she'd decided to trade with the Indians for things she needed for her and her family. She'd not only found the Lakota to be friendly, and most of them able to speak English, but they had been generous as well. Their chief, Chatan, loved to play Santa Claus. He'd come to deliver presents to her and her children last Christmas.

"Perhaps we can go tomorrow? I need to include in my report how civilized the Indians are. The railroad company won't build here if they fear their passengers would be attacked," he said, turning his horse around. "We should head back to town and get a bit of lunch. I have a lot of work to do now that I've seen the area. There are a few reports I'll have you write as well."

"Yes, sir," was all Susan said. She turned her mare around to take the road back to town. She was certain the horse would be much better off back in the livery stables and not having to haul her around. In a few hours she would need to get the wagon to take the children home and put a hot meal on the table.

After leaving their horses at the stables, they convened in the dining hall of the inn. White tablecloths covered the square tables. It reminded her of a fancy restaurant she'd seen in a newspaper during one of her trips to Lincoln. She'd never eaten at the restaurant before as she knew it was beyond her budget. Therefore, she was enjoying herself very much as Edward ordered hot grilled sandwiches and a pot of coffee.

Between the two of them were several sheets of writing paper. Edward was drawing a map of Daisy Creek with his proposed idea of where the train should enter the area and the path it would take. It was then Susan's job to make notes of anything that came to Edward's mind he thought was worth documenting. She wrote quickly with the quill and inkpot he had given her while also making sure her writing was as neat as she could make it. She wanted to prove she could be a good secretary.

"What do you think?" Edward asked as he showed her the map he'd drawn.

Setting the quill aside, she took the map in her hands. After looking at it for a few seconds, she decided it was no good. She ripped it into pieces, much to Edward's alarm.

"What are you doing!?" he exclaimed.

"You've drawn the railroad much too close to the Lakota," she explained. "You'll have to come up with a different plan."

"But it would be perfect. The passengers would love to see a real Indian camp on the other side of the river," he said, raising himself to his full height and looking at her with cold brown eyes. "You had no right to rip up my map. You're moving, so why would you even care?"

"Because this is still my family," she said, her voice rising. "Do you think I want to move? You know what, don't answer that. Just know that no matter what you decide to report to your company, I won't stand by and watch a railroad be built in a location that will damage this community."

She sat still with the pieces of the map in her hands as Edward ran his fingers through his black hair. He had combed it to the side, but it had become quite curly and frizzled when he'd become upset. She couldn't help but think that he looked more handsome with his hair a little wilder. The very thought made her feel guilty about finding a man handsome that wasn't her husband.

"Next time you can talk to me about your displeasure in my map. But please don't rip it up. I spent a good bit of time on that," Edward said,

having calmed down a little.

"I don't want you changing your mind and using it anyway," she explained. "Now, I know the perfect place for a railroad."

Edward relented and handed her a fresh sheet of paper. He moved his chair to sit closer to her as she drew another map. He leaned close to see what she was drawing and how her idea was unfolding before him. Her breathing hitched when she realized how close he was. She could smell his cologne and thought it was heavenly.

"There is a good bit of clearing that could take place behind the buildings in town. The train depot could be right beside the saloon. It would be a short walk into town for the passengers, but it wouldn't disturb any of the family homes. It would follow a close route from Omaha," Susan explained once she had finished her drawing. "I believe that no matter where the train comes in and out of town, it will disturb the families that live in Daisy Creek. But by taking it south this way from town, and then over the river, it could meet up with the main line by running north on the other side."

Edward reached out a hand and slid the map in front of him, bumping into her hand for just a moment. She was surprised by how soft his hand felt against hers. Not rough like she knew a man's hand to be.

"I think you have something here," he commented. "I will have to do more research to see if it is feasible. The businesses would have to agree to a railroad track being constructed at their backs."

"It would be free promotion. Passengers would see those businesses as soon as they arrived. It would be a good selling point," she pointed out.

"Indeed, it would. Now all I have to do is convince the railroad company," he stated.

"Well, that sounds like a task for another day," she stated, getting to her feet. "I have to fetch the wagon and pick up the children, then get home and make dinner. Can we pick this up again in the morning?"

"Yes, of course," he said, looking up from the map and into her blue eyes. "Here is the payment for your services today."

He reached into his black leather vest and pulled out a matching wallet. He then handed her a five-dollar bill. She tried hard not to let it show, but she couldn't stop her lips from parting in surprise.

"This is too much," she said when she could command her voice once more.

“Not in my opinion. And might I remind you that my opinion is final?” He turned back to the table, his eyes going to the map as though he needed to memorize it.

She shook her head and pocketed the money before pulling on her new coat and gloves. She knew she should be more grateful, but she couldn’t help but feel a bit put out by his frequent changes in attitude. Susan made her way out of the hotel, trying to get a better understanding of how this temporary job was going to progress.

~*~

When the doors to the inn closed, Edward let out the breath he’d been holding in his chest. He had been focused on keeping a blank expression on his face. He didn’t want Susan to doubt the fact that he was in charge, but as soon as he knew she was no longer in the building, he let the mask fall.

“It is a good map,” he said to himself, leaning back in the chair. “There are details here even I wouldn’t have taken into consideration. She clearly cares about this town, yet she is willing to leave it all behind.”

“More coffee for you, sir?” asked a young waitress who had come to collect the empty plates.

“No, thank you,” he replied curtly. He then started gathering up the sheets of writing paper, intending to return to his room for the rest of the day.

He got halfway up the stairs when he remembered Susan’s recommendation. It was Friday night, and she’d said the saloon would be worth a visit. From time to time, he visited saloons to play cards. He never paid much attention to the showgirls and their performances. It was the thrill of betting that drew him. He could use a good distraction, and a night out would do him some good.

His room at the inn was elegant, to say the least. He could tell that the place had been designed with luxury in mind. The door was solid oak, and when he locked it behind him, he could tell it was secure, not held with some flimsy lock that could be easily picked and manipulated. The floors were carpeted in light tan that looked almost white. He took his black leather boots off on the mat by the door, afraid to track in any dirt. He could only imagine how hard it was to clean such pristine carpets.

The walls were papered with a blue and yellow floral design—both masculine and feminine. The wood trim appeared to be lined in gold, and the large bay windows gave him a view of the town. As he walked

over to the thick burgundy curtains, he looked out at the busy street, thinking there was certainly more to Daisy Creek than he had thought.

If he was honest with himself, this was more of a vacation than serious business. The only reason he'd been sent here was because the Union Pacific Railroad was tired of receiving Mayor Joshua Tayden's letters. The man had sent the main office in Omaha a letter every month for the past seven years. Edward's presence in town was just to get him to stop. He doubted that the railroad would consider building a line to such a small town.

But now that he was there and had spent the day in the outskirts, he was starting to wonder if there was a larger possibility. A train depot would benefit the town in multiple ways. It could be built on from Lincoln, and it could tie into the main line back north, up along the river. It would give the railroad company access to this part of the state, and passengers would be interested in vacationing in Daisy Creek for the horse races. Edward knew they were the best in the state.

But it would be Edward's job to show the railroad company that Daisy Creek had more to offer than a horse race once a year. He could write about the fine inn, the welcoming community, and the decent country food at the restaurant. Now, with business in mind, he would visit the saloon so he could include it in his report. With the prospective train depot being built close to the saloon, the company would want to know what type of place it was.

Before he did anything else, Edward sat down at the writing desk in the room. He set his papers aside, pulled out a fresh sheet, and began his letter to the Union Pacific Railroad. They would want his initial thoughts about the small town, whether it would benefit the company to actually build a rail line to Daisy Creek, and so on. Edward was honest and perhaps a bit more optimistic than he normally was when writing to the company that funded his life. He was relied upon because he had sound judgment and was always honest. Now he was wondering just how far he was bending the truth.

To Donaven Adams,

My research in Daisy Creek has the potential to be beneficial to the Union Pacific Railroad. This town offers more than even Joshua Tayden has been detailing in his letters all these years. There is ample land for families to travel here and set up new farms and homesteads. Land sales would increase for the UP if a rail line was brought to this area. There are plenty of resources for travelers, and more than one reason passengers would want to come here on vacation. So far, I recommend Daisy Creek as a

depot for the UP. I will send my final report in two weeks,

Edward Finnegan

Knowing that the railroad company made most of its money selling land to settlers from back East and even Europe, he wanted to assure the company that there was plenty to be bought and sold near Daisy Creek as part of the land grant the Union Pacific Railroad had been given by the government. Simply put, wherever the railroad company decided to build a railroad line, the government would give the company the land to do it.

Edward was certain that the mayor didn't know this detail. Mr. Tayden only saw the benefits a rail line would bring the town; he didn't know that it would also increase the town's population through land sales. If a train depot was built in Daisy Creek, it would make this small town a city in just one year.

Knowing there was little he could do about any of that, Edward prepared himself for an evening out. He was ready to play some cards, lose his thoughts in the game, and allow himself to stop worrying about the future of Daisy Creek. Or about Susan. Yet, every time his thoughts started to wander, his mind returned to her. What was he going to do about the secretary that was catching his fancy?

Chapter Five

“Mother, is that a new coat?” Frank Junior asked when they returned to their cabin on the outskirts of town.

Susan chuckled as she hung it up by the front door. “Frank, we rode home all this time, and you just now noticed, when I took it off?” she teased. She pointed at the fireplace. “Now build up the fire while I get dinner started.”

“Where did you get a new coat?” Nicole asked as she followed her mother toward the small kitchen.

“I told you about my new employer. He purchased it for me in addition to paying me for today’s work. I got to draw a map of the town and help plan where the new railroad line will go,” Susan explained. She took the cast-iron pot from its hook on the wall and handed it to Nicole. “Take this outside and fill it with water from the well. Please be careful.”

“But if you have a good job, does that mean we still need to move?” Nicole asked, her ten-year-old frame struggling with the weight of the pot.

“Yes, Nicole. We’ve already discussed this. Mr. Finnegan is only in town for a few weeks. I will ask him for a letter of recommendation so I can find an even better job once we are settled in Omaha. Now, move along before that pot gets the best of you,” Susan said firmly.

Nicole nodded once before turning and heading out the back door of the cabin. Eight-year-old Gregory looked up at his mother.

“What can I help you with?” he asked, his voice soft.

“I want to hear all about your day at school,” Susan said, forcing a smile to her face. She often had to do this for her children as she fought back the grief of their imminent relocation. If she earned enough, perhaps she could move them from the cabin to the inn in a few days. That would surely be a nice adventure for them.

“Mrs. Stringfellow said that I have the best handwriting in the entire class,” Gregory said proudly. “Maybe I can write for someone one day like you.”

“Ah, isn’t that lovely?” she exclaimed, wanting her youngest son to feel proud about such a big accomplishment. “It’s good to know how to read and write and to do both well.”

“Gregory might become a businessman,” Frank Junior said as he

passed by them on the way to help Nicole with the pot of water.

"You think so, Ma?" Gregory asked, his eyes growing large.

She didn't want to discourage him, so she nodded in response before turning to the counter. She was cutting potatoes she planned to boil and mash. Mixed with a bit of the salted ham and apples, it would fill their bellies for the night.

"Thank you, Nicole," Susan said. She took the heavy pot of water, walked it over to the fireplace, and placed it on the hook before swinging it over the open fire. "Well, children, you know your chores. Let's get at them before dinner is done. Frank Junior, make sure the horse has enough feed in her bag to last her the night. Nicole, look over your and Gregory's clothes to see what needs scrubbing. I'll look over Frank Junior's and mine later. We have the weekend to get caught up on all the work."

"But what will I do?" Gregory complained. "I'm old enough to help."

"Sweep the floors then, Gregory. Try to get all the dirt and dust out the front door without letting the cold air in. I want to make sure the fire burns all night to keep us warm," she suggested.

In a perfect world, Susan wouldn't have put so many responsibilities on the children. It had been far worse when she had been trying to keep the farm running. But now that that idea had died, she was just left to focus on surviving one day at a time. As long as they could keep the horse alive until they reached Omaha, that in and of itself would be a miracle.

Now that she was working with Mr. Finnegan, she knew she would fall behind on the chores. But if the children helped out, she'd be able to settle down by the fireplace and repair their clothes while the children slept together in the one bed. If she fell asleep in the armchair, that would be fine. It would give her the opportunity to wake in the night and build up the fire once more.

When the food was on the table, Susan said a quick prayer before they all dove into the mashed potato mixture. It wasn't much, but it would have to make do until she could make a trip to get more groceries. If Mr. Finnegan kept paying her five dollars a day, she could provide quite a feast for her children come the following weekend. But for the time being, she was just looking forward to a quiet evening.

"Good food, Ma," Frank Junior said, pulling Susan from her thoughts. She looked at the small wooden table and saw that all three children had finished eating while she had been lost in thought.

"It's not the best, but thank you anyway for saying so," Susan said with a bright smile on her face. "In fact, I was thinking when I go into town to work for Mr. Finnegan tomorrow, you three should come with me. No point staying cooped up in the house all day."

"But what would we do?" Nicole asked, her eyes growing large as though feeling hopeful for the first time in years.

"There is plenty to see at the general store. I could give you each twenty cents to spend there. You could pass the morning reading to one another, and Greggory could show us all how well he writes. The dining room at the inn is quite large, and I am sure you three could find a quiet place to play while I work with Mr. Finnegan," Susan said.

"That sounds like a wonderful way to spend the morning," Greggory said cheerfully.

"But we wouldn't be getting in your way, right?" Frank Junior asked, not looking so convinced.

"You're all old enough to know how to behave in public. You know how to cross the road by yourselves and how to spend your money wisely. If we bring a book to town, you can read quietly to one another or use a bit of paper and a graphite pencil to do some writing. Drawing, even."

"I promise we won't be a bother," Nicole said sweetly, clearly excited about the idea. "It's been a long time since we've spent a day in town that didn't have to do with school."

"Then that shall be our plan," Susan declared.

There seemed to be more light shining in the children's eyes when they finished dinner. Nicole and Frank Junior took care of the dishes while Susan and little Greggory built up the fire with the wood stacked on the back porch. Not by Susan's hand, mind you, but by John McBee's. The local pastor provided her with services of kindness, such as the firewood. She knew she wouldn't have made it this far without accepting such kindness from the community.

With the evening chores all completed, she told the children to change for bed. Using various parts of the cabin for privacy, from the pantry in the kitchen to the linen closet that housed most of their clothing, the children were respectful of one another. When they came back, Susan was happy to see how well they looked after a hot meal and with the glow of the fireplace lighting their faces.

"Well, you three. Climb into bed. Make sure you save room for me on the far end," Susan said. She was sitting in an armchair on the other

side of the fireplace with a basket of mending beside her, ready to start patching up the clothes.

"I love you," little Gregory said, coming to hug his mother.

"I love you too, sweet pea," she replied, wrapping her arms around him. The other children soon joined them, and the large family hug brought her to the brink of tears. She was so proud of her children and the way they had handled things since their father passed away. It was in these moments of comfort and love that she wished Frank were still alive to see how much his children had grown.

"Well, you three," she said, releasing them. "The sun waits for no man. We'll have to get up early to get to town before nine o'clock. You'll need your sleep for our big day tomorrow."

"Yes, Ma," Nicole said. She leaned over and kissed her mother on the cheek.

Susan watched her children climb into the wooden bed. The mattress needed to be restuffed with fresh straw, but she hadn't had the money to afford it. She promised herself that whatever accommodation she found in Omaha would have at least two beds that were proper and comfortable.

Forcing herself to focus on the work at hand, Susan grabbed the first article of clothing that needed mending. She found a hole in one of Frank Junior's shirts, but she was pleased to see that it was on the back and not the front. She would patch it with a bit of fabric, and it could be hidden underneath his coat. She tried hard to have the children look as presentable as possible when they went to school. She hated the idea of them being teased simply because their family was poor. She knew the schoolteachers wouldn't allow such talk in the classroom, but that didn't mean words couldn't be exchanged during breaks and recesses.

As Susan worked on the mending, she said several silent prayers. She dried her eyes more than once as her heart filled with hope. She had enough money to make it to Omaha, and she could provide her children a better life. It wouldn't be the one she and Frank had planned, but it would be better than the shambles they currently found themselves in.

When she was finally able to compose herself, Susan thought about the day ahead. She had promised the children a fun time in town, but she wasn't sure she would be able to fulfill her promise. After all, she wasn't sure if Edward would require another ride around the area. She trusted the children to behave themselves if she did need to

accompany her employer away from the inn. Well, she knew she could trust Frank Junior, but she knew how mischievous Gregory could be when he became curious about something.

Trying to remain positive, she finished stitching the patch onto the back of the shirt. She folded the shirt and placed it on the nearby table before reaching into the basket and drawing out another article of clothing. This time, it was one of Nicole's dresses that she was starting to outgrow. She wondered what Nicole would think if she added another layer of fabric to the bottom to lengthen it. She might be able to ask Maisie Carter if they had any scrap fabric she could have.

It hurt to know that she couldn't afford new clothing for the children. With the three of them growing like weeds, there was only so much she could do with their clothes. Eventually, she would have to purchase new clothing, especially when they reached Omaha and would need to make a good first impression.

When Susan decided it was too late to keep working, she finally readied for bed herself. With the fire burning bright, she changed into a nightgown and slid into bed on the far side. Despite all that she had lost, she still had a deep love for her children and a heart filled with hope. As long as she could keep those two things, she would be able to continue pushing forward toward what she hoped was a better future.

Chapter Six

Edward had thought about apologizing. Something he rarely ever did, because once he made up his mind, things were final. He was a man of action, of confidence, and a force to be reckoned with. These were key to the persona that was helping him make a name for himself. But during a long night at the saloon, he'd continued to think about Susan despite his best efforts not to.

By his fifth round of poker with a group of local men, he was starting to lose more than he had wanted. He forced himself to focus and win back what he had lost, but not all at once, like he knew he could. These were simple farmers and ranchers he was playing with. Not businessmen who had money to blow. So, he did his best to keep the game as civil as possible. He enjoyed listening to their stories and learning more about Daisy Creek and why so many people considered it the best place to live in the country.

By the time he had left the lively establishment, he had gathered quite a bit of good information about the saloon and the surrounding area. Back in the darkness of his room at the inn he wondered if he had been too harsh on Susan. Had he hurt her feelings? Had he been too tough on the woman who had obviously been through so much in her short life?

The next morning he sat in the dining room enjoying a pot of coffee and a plate of buttered toast, waiting patiently for her arrival. He tried hard not to watch the clock. What if she didn't show up? Perhaps she had experienced enough of his coldness and decided it wasn't worth her time? He could always find another secretary if he truly needed to.

When the inn doors opened, he heard an instant chatter and could tell that a family was entering. Certain it wasn't Susan. He looked down at the sheet of writing paper before him. He needed to organize his thoughts for the day's work. What he hadn't expected was to see Susan suddenly taking a seat next to him while three children went to the corner of the dining room and sat down. They whispered to one another while staring at him.

"Good morning, Edward. What do you have in mind for today?" Susan asked, drawing his attention away from the three in the far corner.

"I've made a list," he said, pushing the paper toward her. "Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"Please," she said with a nod, her eyes already on the paper. "Do you

propose another ride around the area?"

"Perhaps on Monday," he replied. He picked up a clean white mug from the table and filled it. "What I am hoping for today is just a discussion about each business. I need to make detailed notes about each of them. This will all be part of my report. Since there are a good number of businesses, I'm hoping to split the work with you."

"I can certainly handle that. We can start at the top of town and make our way down. That would give the railroad company a good idea of what the passengers will see when the train comes through," she reasoned as she accepted the coffee. She took a big sip, put the cup down, glanced at the children in the corner, and then looked back down at the piece of paper. Edward couldn't help but smile when he realized they were her children.

"Sounds logical enough to me. Can you please go ask the inn attendant for more sheets of writing paper?"

Susan gave a quick nod and stood from the table. From where he was sitting with his back to the windows, Edward watched Susan as she went to the counter. He turned to the far back corner and waved at the children, who appeared to be sharing a book. Though they had a clear task to complete, they were more focused on him. The three eagerly waved back at him before raising the book once more to block their view of him.

"Here you are, Edward," Susan said, handing a stack of writing paper to him.

"Thank you, Susan," he replied. "So, let's begin. What are the businesses first seen coming into town from the north?"

"There is a public bunkhouse for the cowboys who come to compete in the horse races. Mayor Tayden manages that. Sometimes others pass through town who need a place to sleep for the night but don't want to stay at a place as nice as this inn. So they stay at the bunkhouse and move on in the morning," she explained. "You also have the sheriff's office, and the jail on the other side of that before the road turns."

"So, the passengers will see the sheriff's office and jail first when they come into Daisy Creek from the north? Doesn't seem like the most appealing introduction to the town," he pointed out as he began taking notes.

"Depending on how far back the railroad line is from the properties, fruit trees can be planted along the route. Nebraska doesn't have a lot of trees this far west, so it might help in other ways, too."

"I'll include that suggestion in my reports," he stated. "Go ahead and write the details about this public bunkhouse while I begin this. I'll have some more questions in a moment."

Edward threw himself into his work, asking questions from time to time so he could get the best details to include in his reports. Susan proved helpful in providing the information he was looking for, and she was also full of ideas for improvements. The passengers' experience was important so they would continue to use the railroad lines.

Furthermore, she was making her own reports, as Edward had shown her. He discovered that besides being a wealth of information, Susan could also write well. There was a clear difference in their writing styles, but they were both clear and precise.

"Do you think we should pause for lunch?" Edward asked when he heard the clock ringing to signal the noon hour, making him wonder where the day had gone.

"We can," Susan replied. She finished the sentence she was writing, then paused and looked up at him. "I can be back in an hour."

"I can order us lunch," he offered.

"Thank you for the offer, but I already have plans for lunch," she said.

"What plans, if you don't mind my asking?"

Susan paused as she got to her feet. She pushed in her chair and glanced at the three little ones in the corner. Having found sheets of writing paper of their own, they seemed to be writing something with graphite pencils.

"I promised my children that I would take them to the Clayborn Café for lunch," she explained, her voice soft. Edward studied her expression and realized she was embarrassed by this statement. "If you have no objections, I will get going so I can be back in a reasonable amount of time."

"I do have an objection," he said firmly, getting her full attention once more. "I don't think there is anything wrong with your introducing me to your children and us sharing a meal here at the inn. It's dreadfully cold outside today."

Susan stared at him, her hands still on the back of the chair. He could tell he had upset her, but he kept his eyes focused on her light blue ones. From the way her jaw was clenched, it was clear that she was having an internal conversation with herself. He could tell that she thought it was a bad idea.

"I wouldn't mind telling your children some stories about Omaha. It might help them be a little excited about moving," he offered, knowing he would need to offer her more than a free meal.

"Very well, then," she finally agreed. "But let me warn you now you might be bombarded with questions. They are children, after all."

"I heed your warning," he said with a nod of understanding.

While she went to go collect her children, Edward cleaned up the table. He moved all their papers to a nearby table so that there was nothing in the way when the children came to sit.

"Good afternoon," he said in greeting. "My name is Edward Finnegan, and I work for the Union Pacific Railroad."

"Is it hard building a railroad?" the youngest boy asked as he took a seat in a chair next to his mother.

"Very hard," Edward answered as he took to his seat once more. "Lots of paperwork and planning before the first timber can be hammered into place."

"You must be very strong to build a railroad," the young girl said. When Edward looked at her, she looked away, as though embarrassed about speaking up.

"I have not physically built a railroad before. I'm the one who does all the paperwork and reports," he explained with a smile. He was enjoying his little audience.

"Then you must be smart," the eldest boy said. The young man's eyes observed him very closely as though trying to unearth his darkest secrets.

"That I am," Edward admitted with a nod. "I very much enjoy outsmarting others. I like to think that's how I ended up here, writing reports about Daisy Creek. Thankfully, I bumped into your mother and found someone who can also write good reports and who knows a lot about this town."

"Our ma's the best there is," the youngest boy said proudly. "I have good handwriting like her. One day, I'll be a smart businessman."

Edward couldn't help but laugh out loud. He hadn't laughed so hard in quite some time. "Yes, sir," he managed to say through his mirth. "Never give up on that wonderful dream. The more you tell people, the more it becomes a truth."

The little boy looked quite happy to hear that. When Edward looked over at Susan, she seemed to be genuinely happy. There was a smile

on her face as she looked at her children lovingly. He could see that this brood was her entire world.

After Edward had ordered an array of dishes for them all to try, much to the delight of the children, he took the time to get to know each of them individually. He didn't get the opportunity to spend much time with children since he only ever socialized with businessmen. Children were left at home with their nannies. It didn't take long for him to remember how delightful children could be, especially when they were at the age of understanding and logic. It was quite humorous to listen to their stories.

"And then Nicole left me," Gregory exclaimed. "She convinced me to climb to the top of the apple tree to get the apples the birds hadn't gotten yet. And then, by the time I'm tossing the apples down, she's gone!"

"I was only hiding behind the other side of the tree," Nicole defended herself. "It was funny to hear you calling out like a scared crow."

"Not as funny as the time you got locked in the cellar," Frank Junior said to his younger sister. "I still don't know how you did that."

"Oh, why did you have to bring that up?" Nicole complained. "That was so embarrassing. The door got stuck, that's all."

"We all have embarrassing stories to tell," Susan said. "But I think now is a good time to focus on eating. Please go wash up and come right back."

"Yes, Ma," Frank Junior said. He rose from the table and pulled his two younger siblings after him.

"They are quite remarkable for their ages," Edward complimented her when the children had gone around the far corner. "Very intelligent."

"Thank you," Susan replied with a genuine smile. "I'm surprised, really. I didn't think they would be so smart since I was never good in school and neither was Frank. These children are truly miracles."

"I can tell that they will have bright futures. There are good schools in Omaha. Even a college. I can see young Gregory going to college one day to be a businessman, and perhaps Frank Junior a doctor. Nicole a nurse. They are all caring and clever."

"College?" Susan stammered. "I've never really thought about that possibility before."

"Just an idea. In these modern times, more of the younger generation is going off to college for big jobs in the city," he stated. "Just a

thought, though.”

By the time the children returned from washing up, the food was being served. Edward found amusement in the delight of the children as they sampled a little of everything. He discovered what a simple pleasure it was to understand how good food was from the perspective of a little one.

“This is the best food we’ve had in a long time!” Gregory exclaimed halfway through the meal.

“Gregory!” Nicole reprimanded him. “You better take that back. Ma is doing her best. She makes good food, too.”

“Sorry, Ma,” Gregory said, looking at his mother. “Your food is good.”

“Don’t worry,” Susan assured him. “I think this is very good, too.”

“Can we go to the general store after lunch?” Frank Junior asked. “I think it would be nice to move around for a bit. Especially after eating.”

“I think that’s a great idea,” Susan said with a nod. “You three just mind your manners at the store. Christopher Wilkinson has no trouble telling me when little ones misbehave in his shop.”

“Yes, Ma,” Gregory said, seeming to take that seriously.

Edward watched the interaction with much amusement. The children shared plenty of details about Susan and their life together that they probably weren’t aware they were letting slip. Their clothing was proof of the conclusion that he was coming to. This family was poor, and they’d lived a hard life for quite some time. It only reassured Edward that he was doing the right thing. He was helping someone in need. More than that, he was helping a single mother. He knew his parents would want him to. Especially since he knew what it was like to live as a very poor man.

When they had all finished eating, the children accepted some spending money from their mother and headed out of the door with much excitement. Edward couldn’t help but smile to hear their happy voices as they went on their way.

“You should be proud, Susan. Your children are delightful. You can’t say that about most children,” Edward complimented her.

“Don’t let them fool you. They can be a handful sometimes. Especially once they start to bug one another,” she said, shaking her head. “Anyway, let’s get back to it.”

“Certainly,” he agreed. He stood from the table and collected their papers so they could continue to work. Once he was settled back down at the table he handed Susan the reports she had been working on.

“Tomorrow, I’m going to cook a good Sunday dinner. If you want, you could come by and share a meal with us. It’s the least I could do for you for paying for our meal today,” she suddenly said. There was a slight strain to her voice.

Edward thought about the offer for a moment before giving Susan a nod. “I would like that,” he replied. “I think I remember the way. What time?”

“Five,” she replied, her eyes now focused on her report. It was as though they were discussing business. But from the way Susan’s cheeks burned red, he could tell that she felt a bit off. It was a kind gesture, but did it mean anything more than what she had said? That she just wanted to pay him back? Edward wasn’t sure, but he was keen to find out.

Chapter Seven

“Why do I do such things to myself?” Susan muttered as she stood watching carefully the pots she had hanging over the fire.

On the end was a pot of roasted potatoes, carrots, and a bit of cheese to pull it all together. The next was beans and bacon. The one directly over the flames held a whole chicken roasting with sprigs of rosemary and thyme.

She was keeping a close eye on the food while Gregory was sitting on a chair by the front windows, watching the lane for any signs of visitors. Frank Junior was helping Nicole spruce up the place a bit. Though she had kept their cabin clean the entire week, she wanted everything to look as nice as possible. She had a feeling she understood what type of man Edward was. One who lived in the lap of comfort, despite his upbringing. She felt a little ashamed of her small abode and worried what he might think of it.

She tried her best to push those negative thoughts from her mind. She didn’t need to worry about what Edward thought of her home. By her measures, it was a fine home. It was small and easy to manage, and she could keep it warmer than a proper house. It was the perfect size for what she needed. She knew she had nothing to be ashamed of, but after spending the day at the inn and eating a wonderfully cooked meal, she couldn’t help feeling it was a little inadequate.

When she had finished her work with Edward the day before, he had paid her another five dollars. She felt like she owned a fortune now with just two days’ pay. She made a payment on her loan from the bank, then spent a considerable amount at the general store. She was looking forward to the small feast even more than the company of the man she had invited for dinner.

“Ma, you’re mumbling again,” Nicole said. “You told us to tell you when you start to mumble.”

“Yes, darling. Thank you,” Susan replied with a quick smile. If she was mumbling, she was lost in thought. And normally not the good kind.

“Ma! He’s coming! He’s here!” cried Gregory as he stood on a wooden chair and pressed his round face to the window.

“Get down from there!” Susan hollered, praying Edward didn’t hear her from outside. “You’ll go right through the window.”

Gregory giggled as he got down from the chair and rushed to open the door before Edward even had a chance to knock. Their guest

chuckled as he stepped over the threshold and took off his woolen cap. Susan thought him quite handsome for a moment, but her stomach clenched with nerves as his dark brown eyes circled the small space.

"Thank you for joining us for dinner," Nicole said, coming to stand in front of Edward. She even curtsied, which made Susan smile. Her daughter was certainly proving that she could be well mannered.

"Thank you for having me, miss," Edward said with a bow to her. "Could you tell me where to hang my hat and coat?"

"There are hooks by the door," the young lady answered sweetly. Susan shook her head and checked on the food once more before approaching Edward.

"We're pleased to have you for dinner," she said in greeting. "Make yourself comfortable at the table. Nicole, would you pour our guest some coffee? Frank Junior, please help her out. Get cups of water on the table for everyone."

"Yes, Ma," the two said in unison, though Nicole's voice was much chirpier.

"Come, sit next to me," Gregory said excitedly, taking Edward by the hand and pulling him over to the small dining table.

Susan's heart hitched in her chest. She raised her fingers to her lips in worry, wondering how Edward would react to such a forward gesture. But he didn't seem to mind at all as he let the child guide him to the table. She hadn't seen Gregory be that forward with a man since his father had died, and she wasn't sure if it was a good thing or not.

"I'm going to be a businessman like you one day," Gregory said, sitting up on his knees with his elbows on the table. "You must tell me all your secrets."

Edward laughed openly, then leaned toward the boy. Susan saw him whisper something in Gregory's ear. Gregory laughed, quickly covering his mouth with his hands as he listened intently. Susan was relieved to see that Edward looked comfortable at the table. He was dressed well for the occasion, although his attire would have been better suited for a dinner party than a meal at her cabin. As the minutes passed, she began to feel a little calmer. That was until Nicole came over with a mug of coffee, tripped on her feet, and dumped the entire cupful on the table. Susan watched in horror as it ran right across the table's surface and down onto their guest.

"Oh, that's hot!" Edward stammered as he quickly pushed back, trying

to brush the hot liquid from his lap.

“Shoot! Here, let me get that for you,” Susan exclaimed.

She rushed and used the corner of her apron to start dabbing at Edward’s shirt and trousers, trying to soak up the coffee. Nicole stood in utter shock, tears welling up in her eyes, and Gregory’s mouth was hanging open, but Frank Junior quickly put down the other cups of water and rushed to get a rag. Susan was certain Edward would be furious that his clothes were ruined and his skin possibly burned.

“If Maisie doesn’t know how to get the coffee stain out, I’ll purchase you a whole new outfit,” Susan insisted when she finally stood back. She was starting to think that she was doing more harm than good.

“Accidents happen,” Edward said, his voice calm again. “But do you happen to have a spare set of clothes?”

Susan nodded, her mind quickly turning to the trunk underneath the bed. She turned toward her children and was glad to see that they were cleaning up the spilled coffee. She then went to the bed and pulled out the trunk. Sifting through the old clothes, she was able to find a decent pair of jeans and a Western shirt. She shut the trunk back up and slid it back underneath the bed, then approached Edward.

“Storage room right over there. Plenty of space to change,” she said, handing him the clothing. “I know it’s not much.”

“I appreciate it, nonetheless,” Edward said. He accepted the clothes and headed in the direction she had pointed.

When the door closed, Susan turned her eyes on her daughter and placed her hands on her hips. “No more accidents, please,” she quietly hissed.

Nicole nodded a few times and wiped her eyes dry, then returned to fixing up the table. Susan shook her head and went to check on the food. Deciding everything was fully cooked, she used her apron to remove the pots from the iron rod. One by one, she carried them to the table where she had crocheted squares ready to place the hot pots on. As she set the last pot down, Edward emerged from the storage room, now dressed in a clean outfit.

Susan’s lips parted when she saw him. She remembered that shirt now, and the last time Frank had worn it. Seeing it on another man did something to her. Closing her gaping mouth, she gestured to the empty seat and managed to say, “Please, come join us. Dinner is ready.”

"It smells amazing," Edward complimented her. He hung his soiled clothes on the back of his chair before taking his seat.

Frank Junior brought over the basket of dinner rolls and took a seat next to Susan. Gregory and Nicole were forced to share a seat, but for once, they were quiet and didn't complain. After Susan said a quick prayer, the food was passed around, and plates were filled.

"Pastor McBee's sermon was sure something this morning," Edward said as they began to eat. "I haven't heard a sermon like that in all my life. I feel I could listen to him every day."

"I feel the same way," Susan replied. "Pastor McBee comes and visits us often. He always has wonderful words of advice and inspiration. Daisy Creek is fortunate to have him."

"There is a Catholic priest in Omaha. There is a large church there, but the priest's words are not as nice as Pastor McBee's. I'd rather listen to the pastor's words, even though I was born and raised Catholic."

"That's sure saying something," Frank Junior said with a chuckle. "I hear Catholics have to follow a lot of rules."

Edward shrugged. "Depends on how devoted you are," he said. "Everyone has to find their own understanding of God. Regardless of what church you go to."

"Beautifully said," Nicole agreed, finding her voice again. "I am terribly sorry about ruining your clothes."

"My dear, accidents happen. Every day, all around the world. I am sure there was a maid in a palace today that spilled an entire pot of tea on a very fancy prince. That would have been far worse."

A bright smile came to Nicole's face. She laughed a little, and the color came back to her cheeks. Susan was able to relax once more, feeling a little better about the situation. Edward was showing the children how charming and understanding he could be. It was far different from the cold mask he wore when they worked together. When he was focused on the task at hand, he could be quite straight to the point and harsh. She certainly much preferred this version of Edward.

"I think you all will like living in Omaha," Edward said, moving on with the conversation.

"Oh yeah? Why do you say that?" Frank Junior asked, his voice rough around the edges. Susan gave him a pointed look, hoping he understood her silent message to remain cordial during dinner. Of all

her children, she knew that her eldest least liked the idea of moving.

“It’s a big city. Plenty to do and see. Lots of other kids your age. Industry. Factories. The largest horse corral I’ve ever seen. Most of all, endless possibilities,” Edward explained. “There is a good college there. Young folk who do well in school get to go to college.”

“Sure, if you can afford it,” the eldest boy scoffed. “College isn’t for farmer’s boys.”

Edward shrugged as he sliced a small piece of chicken and popped it in his mouth. He chewed and swallowed before speaking again. “Just an idea. You’ll be introduced to lots of different ideas about what a boy is capable of achieving. Even a street rat can become a businessman.”

“There’s no way,” Frank Junior said with a sad smile.

“Well, take a look at me,” Edward said with a chuckle. “I might not look it, but I was a street rat when I was young. Your age, I believe, when I had to live on the street.”

Susan smiled as Frank Junior’s face went still. Food hung on the fork that he held in hand. The boy was in utter disbelief, which his mother found quite amusing. That hardly ever happened.

“School tomorrow, children. Best to eat up before bedtime,” Susan said, reminding the children to focus on their food instead of talking so much.

“I’m going to tell my teacher how I’m going to be a businessman one day,” Gregory declared. “I will wear nice suits, boss people around, and go dancing on the weekends.”

Susan couldn’t help herself. She laughed openly, quickly covering her mouth as she did so. The house rang with laughter at Gregory’s declaration. She couldn’t even remember the last time all three of them had laughed so hard.

“But remember our secret,” Edward said through his mirth. “It is the secret of all good businessmen.”

“I won’t forget, and I won’t tell anyone,” Gregory said with a big grin. He then dove into his food as though there was no tomorrow.

Susan wasn’t sure what the secret was, but she looked forward to hearing it from Edward before too long. When they had finished eating, Nicole helped Susan clear the table and wash the dishes. The young boys kept the conversation going. Edward seemed happy to share stories about his youth. She didn’t particularly like the stories of

how he learned to steal right out of a man's pocket without them noticing, however, especially when Gregory seemed so fascinated by the story. She was only relieved when Edward made a point of explaining what would have happened if he had been caught. Back in those days he might have lost a few fingers as punishment for stealing, or been sent to work in a factory to pay back his debt.

Eventually the sun began to set, and Susan knew it was time to say their farewells to Edward. She was surprised by how well the night had gone after the coffee incident. It gave her hope that she would still have a job in the morning.

"Well, children. Go get washed up and off to bed. The sun waits for no man," Susan instructed as soon as the dishes were washed, dried, and put in the cupboard. She then motioned for Edward to follow her outside. He quickly rose from the table, put on his coat and hat, and carried his clothes outside to the porch.

"Thank you again for coming this evening. I can tell the children enjoyed the visit," Susan said as she walked with him a few paces from the porch to where his horse was hitched.

"I think I enjoyed it more than them," Edward said as he stuffed his clothes into his saddlebag. "I had forgotten how enjoyable it is to spend time with children. They are far funnier than I remember."

"I am certainly glad you think so," she said. A small smile sneaked onto her lips as she wrapped her arms around herself. The night was growing cold, and she would certainly need to stoke the fire before falling asleep. Oh, how she wished winter would end.

"Same time tomorrow?" he asked as he unhitched his horse from the porch.

"And here I thought I was fired after the coffee incident," she joked, her cheeks turning red. She had wanted to confirm her position before he left. This seemed to be the best way to do it.

"It was just an accident, Susan," he said, facing her with the reins of the stallion in one hand. "No one got hurt, and that's all that matters."

"I appreciate your kindness toward Nicole. I can only imagine how ashamed she must be."

"Think nothing of it."

"Oh, before you go, what secret did you tell Gregory about being a businessman?"

Edward smiled and ran his free hand through his hair, looking back

up toward the house. “I told him that he had to always take care of his mother—that men would judge him based on how happy his mother was.”

Susan felt as though the air had been knocked out of her. It was certainly a kind gesture, but it made her wonder why he would even care? Did it have to do something with him losing his own parents?

“You take care, Susan. I’ll see you in the morning,” he said, pulling himself up into the saddle.

Seeing how strong he was by how swiftly he mounted the horse, Susan took several steps back and waved as he turned and rode off. Edward Finnegan was a real gentleman but seeing him ride off in her late husband’s clothes, she couldn’t help but think she was waving her husband away. The thought stung her in the heart, but she headed back inside and put on a smile once more for her children.

Chapter Eight

Feeling a little awkward in his plain clothes, Edward was quick to put his horse to rest for the night at the livery stables.

“You been herding cattle?” teased one of the grooms as Edward made his way toward the open door.

“It sure looks like it, doesn’t it?” Edward said, gesturing down at his jeans.

“Not a bad look for a city fella,” the man said.

Edward just shook his head. Carrying his coffee-stained clothes over one arm, he made straight for the inn. He was relieved to find it warm and see that lanterns had been lit for the night. He found the inn quite inviting, even with all its finery. Wide trim boards ran along the top of the walls where they met the ceiling. The floors were dark wood that was routinely polished so that they shone in the lantern light. The counter to his right was covered in dark blue fabric, and the surface of the counter was made of perfect white marble.

“Are you needing something?” asked the attendant behind the counter.

Edward looked up at him. “No, thank you,” he responded, giving the man a nod.

He couldn’t help but compare the inn to Susan’s home. It really wasn’t the type of home he was used to dining at. In fact, it was really just a small log cabin. The wooden floors were not polished, and they were worn with age. The walls were not whitewashed. There was barely any room inside for the family and the furniture. Yet it felt like a home. At least, the home he remembered as a child when he’d been cramped up in a single room of a large house with his parents. There was love in that log cabin.

In his own room, Edward shut the door behind him and locked it for good measure, then placed his soiled clothes on top of his dresser. He’d have to deal with them in the morning. After lighting a few lanterns, he changed out of his borrowed clothes and put on his outfit for the evening. Only then did he sit down at his writing desk and start going over his report thus far.

Even though he wanted to work, hoping it would lull him to sleep, his mind had other plans. It kept thinking about Susan and her family. He respected the young children. Not because of their good manners, but because of their ability to speak up and say whatever was on their

minds. Frank Junior had made it clear he was not happy about the family's upcoming move.

He now understood why Susan had sold her farm and was going to make the big move. The farm was nothing more than a wasteland. The fields were full of the previous year's crops waving in the wind. The barn was in dire need of repair. There was no life to the farm like there was inside the cabin. He would want to move as well if he was faced with such a challenge.

The need to help Susan burned in his chest as he read over his notes from that morning. He hated to see anyone go through what his parents had endured as immigrants from Ireland. They had learned American ways by the time he was born but couldn't rise in social status.

He couldn't help but wonder what would happen to the three children if anything dire were to befall Susan. He knew what it had been like to grow up on the streets, and he couldn't imagine how much harder that would have been had he been forced to look out for two younger siblings.

The image of Frank Junior rose in his mind. The boy was the same age he had been when his parents had passed away. The memory caused a sharp pain to enter his chest. The sorrow over their death was still strong for him. That pain had influenced him to change his life around as soon as he was old enough. He had been determined to make a name for himself and show his parents how proud they would have been of their son. He was certain Frank Junior's father would want the same for his boy.

A new sense of purpose rose in Edward's chest. He knew that his determination went beyond just Susan. It encompassed her three children as well. He'd grown fond of the four of them in the short time he'd been in Daisy Creek. He couldn't just stand aside and watch this family struggle like he had once struggled.

~*~

Once Susan had dropped the children at the schoolhouse that Monday morning, she took the mare to the livery stables. She left both the wagon and the aging mare in the care of the grooms before making her way to the inn. Susan took a deep breath and let it out slowly when she reached the grand front doors. She would be working with Edward once more, but she also needed to get a few errands done that day. She had to continue preparing for her family's big move.

As she reached out to push open the door, she momentarily looked at

her fine gloves. Never in her life had she owned such nice gloves. They made her feel special in a way, but she reminded herself that the items hadn't come from a beau or a lover. They had come from her boss. She had to focus on the fact that she was there to do a job and nothing more.

Despite how handsome she thought Edward was, or what a gentleman he had been at dinner, she knew that her heart still belonged to Frank. She had decided never to consider another man as a husband. Nevertheless, when she stepped into the dining room and saw Edward all alone at the table, she couldn't help but admire him for a moment.

"Good morning," she said as she neared the table, slipping off her gloves and tucking them into the pocket of her coat.

Edward looked up from the sheet of writing paper he was hovering over. "Good morning," he replied, gesturing to the chair beside him.

Susan pulled off her coat, hung it on the back of the chair, and took a seat. She glanced over the sheets of writing paper laid out over the table. Edward seemed to have been quite busy already.

"I would like to ride the path the train would take into Daisy Creek and so on. I would also like to visit the Indian camp," Edward said. "The weather seems to be warming up, so a good ride would be pleasant."

Susan's chest tightened at the idea. Perhaps if they left immediately she would have time to take care of her errands before school finished. She forced a smile to her face, gave Edward a nod, and mentally prepared herself for the task.

"We can ride to the north, follow the path down, and end at the Indian camp. Then I could introduce you to a few families I know there, if they are not predisposed today," Susan said. "Would you like me to collect these papers so we can get going?"

"Would you like a cup of coffee first? I think there is at least a good cupful left in the pot," he offered, gesturing at the empty cup near her.

Though she would have loved the coffee, she shook her head. "We have a lot of ground to cover."

"Very well. I'll collect the papers and return them to my room. I'll meet you at the livery stables. Let a groom know to collect my horse and a spare for you. If your mare is going to take you all the way to Omaha, you shouldn't overwork her before that long journey."

"Right," she replied as she stood to her feet. She wasn't going to argue with Edward even though she wanted to protest. He had already

shown her such kindness, and she didn't want him to think that she would ever take advantage of him. Until she could think of the right words to say, she simply turned from the table and went on her way.

Back at the livery stables, she told one of the grooms the message she had received from Edward. The man was quick to gather Edward's stallion and a young mare that seemed to have plenty of life to her. She was prancing already when the groom brought her out of her stall and started to saddle her. The horse was a beautiful chestnut mare that Susan immediately fell in love with. When Edward arrived, he caught her stroking the horse's mane.

"She seems taken with you," he said.

Susan couldn't help but smile as the mare nudged her in the chest. "I think you're right. Either that or she is just eager for some proper exercise," she said. "Are you ready?"

"Sure am," Edward replied before pulling himself up into the saddle of his stallion.

Susan followed suit. She was looking forward to her ride around town on such a wonderful horse. Curious to find out just what the mare was capable of, she turned her toward the open door of the stables and followed Edward in a fast trot along the main road. Once they were clear of town, they pushed the horses into a gallop. Susan was surprised by how powerful the mare was, and she soon realized that this had to be the most enjoyable horseback ride of her life.

She only pulled the reins back on the mare when Edward started to slow his stallion. They stopped a few miles north of town, and Edward took a few moments to survey the area.

"With no major mountain passes, I can envision a railroad line that runs about a mile from the main road south from Omaha," he said, pointing north and bringing his finger down along the road. "Nothing but prairie grass for miles and miles. No trees to take down."

"This is an empty land," Susan confirmed. She urged her mare alongside his stallion so she could more easily speak with him. "There are homes over there, on the other side of the road. At least on this far-left side, no homes will be disturbed."

"For now, at least. A railroad line means that more people are likely to move here. The company makes more money selling land than anything," he explained. "All this wide-open space will no doubt be converted into homesteads over the next few years."

"An increase in population would be a good thing for Daisy Creek.

However, I wonder how it would affect the peace between the people and the Indians. When we go to their camp, we should talk to Chatan about this.”

“Who is that?” Edward asked.

“The chief of the Lakota. He is their leader, and he will want to be informed of anything that concerns the future of his people,” she explained. “I think you will like him.”

“And why is that?” he asked with a smile.

“Because he is like you. Very intimidating on the outside, but warm and fuzzy on the inside,” she teased.

Edward chuckled and shook his head. “Let’s follow a possible trail. I think our horses are up for a bit of exploration through the grass.”

“After you,” she said, gesturing for him to go forth.

They didn’t push the horses at a full gallop as a trot was fast enough for them to cover the distance. She tried to imagine a railroad along where they were riding, heading south back toward town. More homes would be built along the route. The population would increase. Wealth and vibrance would come to the town she cared so much about.

It hurt all over again to think that soon she would be leaving it behind. She liked to think she could last a little longer. Perhaps if she waited long enough, the railroad would come and she might be able to find a job in Daisy Creek. A new home could be built for her and her children. They could have a future in town after all. But the cold truth was that the railroad was not guaranteed, and she could be waiting for years for it to actually happen. No, she had to push forward with her move to Omaha, despite the pain it caused.

They made it back to town behind all the buildings as they continued south and back toward the main road. Then they headed west toward the Indian camp. They rode silently, but Susan remained very much aware of Edward. She thought about how his brows would knit together when he was thinking hard and how a smile would appear on his face when he reached a good conclusion. She enjoyed watching him. He was an unusual man, and she knew he was kind despite the mask he sometimes wore—a stern expression that she could see right through.

The expression she enjoyed seeing the most on his face was the look of surprise when she led him down the lane that passed through a small cluster of trees before opening up to the Lakota camp. Teepees dotted

the landscape as far as the eye could see, and scores of Indians were going about their day. Clothed in hide garments, most of the older members of the tribe wore feathers in their hair. She showed Edward over to the corral, where they could leave their horses behind a fence of woven reeds. Then she led him through camp toward the chief's teepee.

"I've never seen anything like this before," Edward said softly, glancing around at the smoke rising from each tanned teepee, and the images painted on each of them.

Children ran in packs around the camp, playfully chased by smaller groups of older boys. The children always seemed so free and eager for games. All the women were working on something. Cooking. Sewing clothes. Grinding dried herbs for medicinal teas.

When they came to the largest teepee in the camp, Susan stepped forward and scratched her nails against the outside.

"Why did you do that?" Edward asked softly when she stepped back.

She smiled at him, then turned back to see the flap being opened. A young man with long black hair and equally dark eyes stepped out. Edward surmised that he must be one of the Chief's sons. Dressed in a long tunic and hide leggings, he looked almost as intimidating as his father.

"Good afternoon. We've come to share some news with Chatan," Susan explained.

"Is it good news?" the young man asked in almost perfect English.

"It is neither good nor bad," Edward said. "Just news of the future."

"You are not from around here. I can tell by how scared you look," the young man teased, turning his dark eyes on Edward.

"I am not scared," Edward protested, but Susan did not fault him for being so. Coming to the camp would make anyone who was not familiar with the tribe nervous.

"Come," the young man said, chuckling as he went back inside the teepee.

Susan stepped forward and held the flap open for Edward. He shook his head as he went in, and Susan quickly followed him. It was much warmer inside the teepee. She looked around and saw the family gathered around the fire. She knew this would be a good meeting when Chatan got to his feet and approached them. There was a smile on his face as he warmly greeted his visitors.

Chapter Nine

“Susan Taylor. It is good to see you again,” the tall Indian man said.

Edward realized that Susan had been right in her description of the chief. He was taller than Edward, with long black hair streaked with gray flowing down his back. There were wide black feathers braided into it, along with beads of red and white. His face was like a stone, hard and rigid, but the smile on it was genuine.

“It is good to see you as well,” Susan replied. “Your youngest son has grown so much.”

“Ah, Wambleeska. He is my pride and joy now that his older brother is married with a dwelling of his own on the north side of the camp. A teepee and a house,” Chatan said. “I also have a grandson now.”

“Congratulations!” Susan exclaimed. “I have come with a man new to this area. His name is Edward Finnegan. He represents the railroad.”

When Chatan turned his eyes to Edward, his smile faded. The Indian chief looked at him intently, and Edward stood tall, hoping to pass whatever test he was about to face.

“I can only guess, then, that you have come to tell me about this railroad,” Chatan said to Edward.

He nodded in reply. “I have,” he answered. “I will soon send a report to the railroad company about why I think a line should be built to Daisy Creek and beyond. It would bring many new families to the area, as the company will sell the land around it to make a profit.”

“Come and sit with me while I think about this matter,” Chatan said, gesturing to the woven rugs beside the firepit.

Edward sat, and Susan took a seat beside him. His eyes shifted to the woman on the other side of the firepit. She seemed to be cooking something in a tan clay pot in the embers of the fire. The chief's son sat beside the woman, who he could only assume was the boy's mother.

“This English word ‘company,’ what does it mean?” Chatan asked, pulling Edward out of his thoughts.

“It means a business,” he explained. “Does that make sense?”

Chatan nodded and released a grunt. Edward could not tell if that was good or bad.

“And this business. It will send people to build this railroad? The one that brings the metal monster?” the chief asked.

Edward forced himself not to laugh. He'd never heard a train be described in such a way, but between the sound it made while running down the rails, the steam it released, and the loud whistle, he could see why someone would refer to it as a metal monster.

"Yes," he managed to say without laughing. "It would come from the north, move behind the town, and continue past this camp on the way to the big river in the west. Then it will travel north along the river."

The chief let out a deep sigh. "I hope it will not come too close to the camp," Chatan said. "I am worried about how it will affect my people."

"That is why we came today, Chatan," Susan said. "To tell you of the possibility. It is not certain."

Chatan nodded and released another grunt.

"For this, I am grateful," the chief stated. "What other changes would it bring?"

"Since it will be easier to come to this area, and there is much land here, new families will move in. They will start farms or homesteads. In time, the town will become a city," Edward explained honestly. He knew that there was no reason to lie to the chief, and he was certain that Chatan would know if he concealed the truth.

"It would bring many new people who are not used to spending time with Indians. Not used to seeing us. But they will be used to fearing us," Chatan declared, looking older by the minute. "I think we have much work to do if this happens." He said the last part while looking at his family. They, too, had grave looks on their faces.

Then Chatan turned back to Edward and said, "For as long as I have been alive I have tried to keep the peace between the Lakota and the white man. We have endured many challenges over the years, but we have maintained our lands and our way of life. We have even learned the white man's words, and many of our people speak this language.

"My eldest son, Akecheta, even married a white woman, and together they have a son. My grandson will one day be the chief of this people. He is of both peoples, but the Lakota will still honor him. But we do not know what will happen when many new families come to live in this area. Will this lead to trouble and tension?"

Edward understood that the chief had good reasons to be concerned. They were questions that he could not answer because there hadn't been a situation like this before. He'd never even met an Indian, let alone a chief who so easily welcomed him into his teepee. Though the

Lakota were a big part of the Daisy Creek community, he wasn't sure if the railroad company would see the situation as he did.

"I have seen Indian tribes moved from their lands for a railroad to be built," Edward said honestly. "But the path the railroad would follow would not be in the way of this land. You would be able to hear it in the distance, but you and your people would not see it."

"That, at least, is good news," Chatan said with a nod. "I suppose we will have to face the other challenges when they come. If they come."

"Are you hungry?" the Indian woman asked, getting Edward's attention.

Knowing that it was never good to refuse food, he smiled and gave her a nod. "I am always hungry," he replied.

"Good answer," Chatan said, clapping his hand on Edward's shoulder and almost toppling him over. "Let us share a meal."

Edward was uncertain what he'd just gotten himself into as bowls were filled with whatever was being cooked in the clay pot. As the wooden bowls were passed around, he noted that they didn't come with spoons. When he passed a warm bowl to Susan, he also noticed the color of the soup. It wasn't until he held his own large bowl in his hand that he started to wonder what it was. Thinking it would be rude to ask, he simply followed the example of everyone else. He held the bowl to his lips and slurped it down.

He was certainly surprised. He hadn't expected it to taste so flavorful, and it didn't take him long to drink it all. The broth was slightly thick, but it didn't contain any chunks of meat or vegetables. Yet he felt full by the time he finished it. After doing his best to clean his face on the sleeve of his black coat, he gave an approving smile to the Indian woman.

"Thank you. That was very good," he said. "What was it?"

"Buffalo soup," Susan replied.

Edward laughed, thinking she was joking. But he read her face and quickly realized that she was completely serious. He stopped laughing and sat still, looking at the Indian woman for confirmation. She nodded, and the Indian family laughed at his shocked expression. He could not believe he had just drunk so much of this soup.

"It is my specialty," the woman explained. "I am glad that you could experience it since I only make it a few times a year."

"I am honored," Edward forced himself to say, reminding himself that

he needed to show the utmost respect.

They said their farewells, and Edward and Susan took their leave. Chatan followed them out of the teepee.

"I hope that you will come to visit me again during your time in this area. At least one more time before you depart," Chatan said to Edward as they shook hands.

"I will be sure to do so," Edward replied.

"Ah, Susan Taylor. You must bring your children next time. I know how the little ones like the meat upon the stick. We shall have a big meal together," Chatan said to Susan.

"I will be sure to do so before we move to Omaha."

"Move?" Chatan asked.

Edward looked at Susan and saw the joy on her face from visiting with the Indians suddenly disappear. She nodded slowly and turned her eyes from the chief before focusing on him again.

"I have sold the farm, Chatan. I will move to Omaha with the children as soon as I finish my work with Edward," she explained. "I am going to look for a job in the city to better support my children."

Chatan huffed and crossed his arms over his chest. Edward could tell that he was not happy.

"No, Susan Taylor. You come live here with my people. We will take care of you," the chief said sternly. "You have been in this land all your life. I have memories of your parents and your husband's parents. Their spirits would not be happy if you left this land."

"I cannot stay," Susan declared with tears in her eyes. "Chatan, you know we cannot live by your ways. I must find a way to support my family on my own."

"Susan Taylor, remember my words. You will not leave this land." With that, the chief turned and went back inside his teepee.

Edward didn't move right away. He watched Susan and the way she struggled with her emotions. She raised her gloved hands and wiped the tears from her eyes. He was overcome with the need to embrace her but thought better of it. Instead, he rested a hand on her shoulder.

"Let's get back to town. I could use a large pot of tea to clear my mouth of this soup," he said softly.

This seemed to do the trick. Susan laughed as they turned toward the corral. Edward dropped his hand from her shoulder as they walked

together to go collect their horses. Clouds were building overhead. What he'd thought would be a warm day could quickly change as a possible storm started to build on the horizon.

When they arrived back in town, they left their horses in the livery stables and returned to the inn. Edward was quick to request a large pot of Earl Grey tea, a cup of sugar cubes, and a small plate of whatever sweets were available.

"Right away, Mr. Finnegan. I am sure our cook can put something together for you in a jiffy," the waitress replied.

"You're a saint," Edward replied. He gave the young lady a wink, then joined Susan at their table.

As he sat down, he considered the woman sitting across from him. She looked lost in thought as he shed his coat and placed it on the back of his chair.

"I never thought I'd drink soup with an Indian chief," he said, pulling her from her thoughts. A small smile came to her face as her blue eyes focused on him. *Dazzling blue eyes that sparkle like diamonds*, he thought as he looked into their depths.

"I am glad you were able to meet him today. You gave him a lot to think about," Susan replied. "Do you think that having a train depot here in Daisy Creek will have any negative effects on the town?"

Edward smiled. He'd been wondering when she was going to ask him that question. Most people only focused on the benefits a train depot would bring. Rarely did they think about the downsides. He folded his hands, placed them on the table, and leaned forward so he could speak quietly with Susan.

"I have seen small towns become cities within years of getting a train depot," he answered honestly. "Take Lincoln, for example. I'm sure you can remember a time when it used to be a small town like Daisy Creek, since you've lived in these parts all your life."

Susan nodded. "Yes. When I was young, I rode to Lincoln with my father at about the time the train depot was being built. We had gone to trade grain for hay."

"Well, Lincoln has transformed since then. Multiple streets of different businesses. More than one store. Certainly more than one saloon," Edward said, shaking his head. "Yes, more people will move to this area. The Union Pacific Railroad will make sure of that. They rely heavily on land sales, and the government gives them the land for the railroad lines. Therefore, there will be more business. The town will

expand. Then Mr. Tayden will have to figure out just how well he can manage it.”

“You’re saying it could get out of control?” she asked.

“Possibly. With rapid growth it’s hard to keep a handle on things and regulate. Especially since the railroad will be selling the land plots. They will be cheap, too,” he explained. “Chatan has reason to worry. The people here are used to the Indians. Most people outside of this area are not. Meaning, the rest of the world.”

“The world?” she repeated. “What do you mean?”

“Union Pacific Railroad won’t just advertise in the papers back East. They’ll also advertise in Europe. That’s what convinced my parents to come here. They saw an advertisement in their paper and came here thinking it would be a better life.”

Susan fell silent then, deep in thought. The waitress came with their pot of tea and a small plate of sugar cookies. She winked at Edward this time, but he didn’t respond. He accepted the items, then placed them between him and Susan. The waitress hurried off. Edward couldn’t help but find the situation humorous. He supposed anyone looking at the two of them might have thought they were a couple instead of work partners.

The thought intrigued him as he served them both a cup of tea. He offered Susan the dish of sugar cubes, and she accepted with a small smile. They ate the cookies in silence. She must have been thinking about the future of Daisy Creek, but all he could think about was her. She was a beautiful woman, despite living a difficult life, having borne three children, and having lost her husband. It made him wonder why she hadn’t remarried.

“There are many single businessmen in Omaha,” he finally said. “If you are considering remarrying, I’d be happy to make a few introductions.”

“Good heavens, no,” Susan said with such certainty it left Edward reeling. “I’m sorry, that was a bit forceful. What I mean to say is that I’m not sure if I want to marry again.”

“How come?” he asked when he had regained his senses.

“I’m content being a widow,” she said. “And I wouldn’t want to force my children to accept another man as their father. I’m not sure they are ready for such a commitment, and so I haven’t made it a plan of mine.”

“Life would be much more comfortable if you were married,” he tried

to reason.

"Forgive me, Edward, but you have neither been married nor lost a spouse," she said, setting her cup down firmly. "It is not your place to advise me on matters of matrimony."

Edward knew he had offended her. Especially when she pushed back from the table, her cookie half-eaten and her tea not yet finished. With her lips pressed into a fine line, she began to pull on her coat.

"Forgive me, Susan. You're right. I've spoken out of place," he said, trying to calm her. He didn't want them to part on bad terms.

"Is there anything else you'd like me to assist you with today?" she asked once her coat was on and her gloves back on her hands.

"No," he replied, knowing he'd outdone himself this time. As he did to most women he spoke to, he had offended her with his strong opinions.

"Very well. I'll be off. Until tomorrow," she said, not even looking at him.

He let her go, wishing he'd done something to stop her. She hadn't even stayed long enough for him to pay her for the day. She was clearly too angry about what he'd suggested to worry about money. He watched her walk along the boardwalk toward the bank and realized she had plans other than returning home or going to collect her children from the schoolhouse. He knew he had only moments to act.

He quickly pulled on his coat, left the inn, and went to the livery stables where he knew Susan kept her mare and wagon. There, he caught the attention of one of the grooms.

"Sir, do you need your horse?" asked the groom, clearly seeing that Edward was in a rush.

"No, good fellow. Susan Taylor's wagon and mare. Where is it? There is something I forgot to give her, and she has gone to run some errands. I do not wish to disturb her business," he explained.

"Certainly, sir. Her wagon is over there, at the end of the aisle." The groom pointed. "You can't miss it. It's the one that is overdue for some repair."

"Do you think it would make the journey to Omaha?" Edward asked as the two walked down the aisle of wagons positioned side by side.

"Heavens, no!" the man answered. "I'm surprised it made it into town today."

“Noted,” Edward said with a nod. “Good day.” His words indicated that he wished to be alone, so the groom moved away but not too far, no doubt ensuring that Edward wasn’t going to do anything dangerous to the wagon.

Edward reached into his coat and pulled out his wallet. He took a few bills from it and placed them underneath a bale of hay in the back of the wagon. He made sure that they were far enough in that they wouldn’t fall out, and just enough was sticking out that they would be noticed when the children climbed into the back of the wagon.

With his good deed completed, Edward returned to the inn and went up to his room without seeing Susan again. After his early morning exploration, there was plenty for him to write about in his report. Furthermore, he had a strong feeling telling him to send that report sooner rather than later.

He sat at his writing desk and got straight to work. He knew there was a possibility that he would face Susan’s wrath in the morning—or at least her displeasure—so he focused on his work and the future of Daisy Creek.

Chapter Ten

Susan was extremely flustered as she stormed out of the inn. *How dare he suggest that I remarry?* she thought to herself as she hurried along the boardwalk toward the bank. *Does he not understand I would never want to go through that pain again?*

Susan did her best to compose herself as she went into the bank. It was a stark difference from the first bank Mr. David Barber had built upon his arrival in Daisy Creek. He was a different man as well. David was standing with his youngest child propped up on the counter that stretched the far-left section of the bank. The child seemed to be enjoying a slice of dried apple.

“Good, isn’t it?” David said to the child as Susan approached. The child nodded happily. “Ah, Mrs. Taylor. How may I help you today?”

“Hello, Mr. Barber. I’ve come to pay back the rest of my debt and deposit some money,” she explained, reaching into her pocket for the money that had been paid to her by the new owner of her farm. Only then did she realize that she hadn’t stayed long enough for Edward to pay her for the day’s work. But she figured that would be a problem to deal with later.

“Very well, then. Let me take a look at what you have,” David said. He stood close to his son while he quickly counted the money. “\$100 exactly. Let me get the ledger.” He put the money aside on the green velvet countertop and reached below the counter for his large leather-bound ledger.

“Papa, can I write in your book?” asked the boy, who couldn’t have been older than three.

“Not today, Jimmy. But when you are older, and if you still want to, you can write in the book. But you must learn all your numbers. It’s very important,” David said, trying to pretend he was being serious with his boy. The young boy giggled in response. David shrugged, opened the ledger, and laid it flat for the three of them to see. Then he opened it to the page where Susan had signed for the loan she had taken.

“Very well, Mrs. Taylor. Look here,” David said, pointing out her name. “I’m going to sign right next to it, indicating that your loan has been paid.”

“Good,” Susan said. She watched Mr. Barber sign his name and place a small check at the beginning of the line where it stated the amount of her debt.

“Now, I will take the difference and add it to the other part of the ledger that details all the deposits,” he explained, flipping through the book. Susan watched him write down the amount that would be deposited into the safe in the bank. It was the amount she would withdraw before she made her way to Omaha.

“Well, that’s all set then. Is there anything else I can do for you today?” he asked once he’d finished making the entry in the ledger.

“No, that will be all,” she replied. “Have a good day.”

“Bye-bye,” said the young boy, coaxing a smile out of her. She waved in response before turning and heading out of the bank.

It was nearing the time the school would release the children, so Susan didn’t dawdle. She had wanted to talk to the inn attendant about the rates for rooms. That way, she could plan when to move her little family to the inn before heading to Omaha—a three-day trip, but worth it to start a better life.

When Susan reached the livery stables, she asked for her mare to be hitched to her wagon. She had just enough to pay the groom. After that she would need to rely on the money she made from Edward to cover her family’s daily needs.

“You take care, Mrs. Taylor,” the groom said as he brought her wagon and horse to her.

She thanked and paid him, then pulled herself up onto the driver’s bench. Collecting the leather reins, she gave them a quick flick to get her mare moving forward. Merging with the rest of the traffic, she went up through town before pulling the mare to a stop in front of the schoolhouse. She was relieved when she saw the children out front waiting for her.

“Climb in, my dears. It’s time to head home,” she called to them. She couldn’t help but smile as she watched them climb in back, using the wagon wheel as a step. Frank Junior was kind enough to help his younger siblings up before climbing in himself. She waited until they were all settled on the hay bales before looking forward. She would need to turn the wagon around and head back south through town and onto the open road.

“Ma, some of your money fell back here,” Nicole called.

Susan paused, looked over her shoulder, and watched her daughter lean down and pick up a few bills. Nicole passed them to her mother, who quickly collected them. Her eyes went wide when she realized there were ten of the dollar bills in her hands.

“There must be some sort of mistake,” she said, looking from the bills to where Nicole was sitting. “You found this underneath the hay bale?”

“It was sticking out right here,” she confirmed.

“My word,” Susan mumbled as she pocketed the money. “I had no idea. Thank you, Nicole. I appreciate your honesty.”

“Of course, Ma,” Nicole said, looking a little confused.

Susan didn’t know what to think. She faced forward and gave the reins another good flick, sending the mare forward. As she carefully wound her way through town, she wondered what it would be like when it became a city. It would be far harder to navigate, she figured. That thought made her wonder what it would really be like to live in Omaha. She was hoping that living in the city would give her the comfort of being able to walk to where she needed to go. She knew that neither the mare nor the wagon would last long after their arrival in Omaha.

“Ma, what’s for dinner?” Gregory asked, pulling her from her thoughts.

“There is enough leftover chicken for sandwiches,” she replied. “That could be a nice and easy dinner.”

“Is Mr. Finnegan coming?” the young boy asked.

“Gregory,” Frank Junior said. “Guests don’t come to dinner every day. And certainly not the same one over and over.”

“But I like him,” Gregory protested. “He should come to dinner every day. He is funny. He makes me laugh.”

“And he’s handsome,” Nicole squeaked, causing them all to laugh.

“Oh, my poor girl. Don’t go giving your heart to the likes of him,” Susan warned.

“How come, Ma? Do you already fancy him? Don’t you think he’s handsome too?” Nicole asked.

Susan blushed hard, thankful that her children couldn’t see her face. She opened her mouth to speak, then had to close it quickly again when she remembered the words Edward had said to her. Though she hadn’t considered marrying, she reasoned that it wouldn’t be a horrible thing to marry a man like him. After all, he had proven to be good with the children, and he was clearly very well off.

“He is a nice man,” Susan finally answered. “I think he would make

any woman very happy.”

“He makes me happy,” Gregory said, causing Susan to laugh again. She did love the way her children perceived the world.

When they reached the farm, Susan had the children go inside. The wind was kicking up, and the sky had started to darken with rolling clouds. She mumbled to herself as she put the mare and wagon away for the night. She knew that the storms in early spring could be terrible. Perhaps it would even snow again. She dearly hoped not as she made sure her horse had plenty to eat for the night. Then, she finally went up to the house.

“Well, you three. It’s time to take care of the evening chores. Frank Junior, you go bring in the buckets of water. We’ll make tea with some of the mint I have. That will be nice to keep us warm. Nicole, we’re going to be boiling some water for laundry. Let’s sort through what needs cleaning and what needs patching up. Gregory, please set the table for dinner,” Susan said as she stepped into the house.

After closing the door behind her, Susan hung up her coat. She was thankful that her children were old enough to show some level of independence and help with the chores.

It was certainly a small blessing in disguise that her husband had passed at an age when the children were old enough to help around the house. She wouldn’t have survived her first days of grief if it hadn’t been for them. Frank Junior had been old enough to fry bacon in a skillet over the fire. Nicole was capable of hauling water so they all could wash and clean their faces. Gregory was old enough to read a few lines of the Bible that gave her moments of comfort. Her children had really helped her get through the worst time in her life.

“Ma, the sky is getting dark out there,” Frank Junior stated as he came in with two large buckets of water.

“I know, son, I know. We’ll have to put up the shutters. Come help me do that,” she replied.

They went around the outside of the house, putting up the wooden protectors and sliding them into place so they wouldn’t fall out during even the strongest of storms. The wind was warm but really starting to pick up, but by the time they had finished the task, Susan thought the temperature had dropped, and she could see her breath in the air when she went inside.

A little worried, Susan built up the fire so that it was plenty warm. She had Frank Junior bring in some more wood from the back porch just in case. Then, with Nicole’s help, she put a large pot of water on

to boil. She brought in the washing tub from the storage room. By the time they had the first batch of laundry soaking, Gregory had finished setting the table. As they sat down to eat, the rains started.

"I missed the smell of rain," Nicole said as Susan looked at the windows. There wasn't much to see through the shutters, but the sudden force of the rain did not leave a good feeling in her stomach. Perhaps it would be a quick storm that would come and go. Not one that would stay the night.

"I like the rains in the fall," Frank Junior said. "They are much slower than this."

"Ma, I don't like the rain," Gregory complained.

Susan looked at her youngest son and remembered that he was afraid of thunderstorms.

"Remember what we talked about?" she said. "That the sound of thunder is the giants walking in Heaven."

Gregory nodded and took a bite of his sandwich. He then closed his eyes when a peal of thunder sounded in the distance and it had them all jumping in their seats.

"Let's eat," Susan said, encouraging the children to focus on their dinner plates.

Then, in the distance, Susan heard something else. At first she thought she was hearing things. Having spent the past few days thinking of nothing but railroads and the future of Daisy Creek, she thought that perhaps she'd gone mad when she heard the sound of a train in the distance. The whistle of its horn. The rushing sound the wheels would make on the tracks. Then, the realization hit.

"Into the cellar," Susan said, spitting out her food and standing from the table.

Frank Junior grabbed Nicole's hand and dragged her forcefully toward the cellar door. Susan picked up Gregory. The two youngest complained, but she didn't care. She knew what was coming. Frank Junior had the cellar doors opened by the time the first piece of hail hit the roof. An ear-piercing roar filled their ears as they descended into the darkness below.

Susan made sure all the children were accounted for before she pulled the doors shut and bolted them. Then she found and lit the lantern so there was enough light to push all her children into the corner between the two large shelves that used to hold a lot more food for the winter.

“What is happening?” Nicole asked with tears in her eyes.

“Sit down. Heads down,” Susan ordered.

She sat on the ground in front of them and wrapped her arms around all three of her children as the chaos began. Sounds of tearing timbers and shattering glass could be heard. Gregory began to cry loudly, clearly afraid. Using her body as a shield, Susan prayed that the floor would hold as the tornado hit their house hard.

She began to pray out loud, repeating over and over, “Dear Lord, protect us.”

Then there was the sound of the house groaning. When Susan felt rain on her back, she realized the floor was giving in to the rush of wind.

“Mother!” Frank Junior called, apparently having seen something she had not.

She opened her eyes, having shut them against the fear of the tornado without even realizing it. Then she was shoved onto her side just as timbers started to tumble down around them. One of them struck Frank Junior.

“No!” she screamed. She pushed her other children out of the way and pulled Frank Junior from the rubble and toward a clear part of the cellar.

“Frank! Frank! Open your eyes!” she called as she cradled her eldest in her arms. He blinked a few times, then winced and raised a hand to cradle his left shoulder. “Child, don’t move,” she ordered.

She looked up through the broken floorboards and into the dark night. Stars twinkled at her, and she struggled to understand what she was seeing. The sky was dark. It was full of stars. And she could see it all from the cellar.

“Nicole. Gregory. Stay with your brother. Make sure he doesn’t move,” Susan said in a strained voice.

The children did as told, helping their older brother sit up so Susan could get to her feet. By some miracle, the lantern was still alight. She carefully picked it up and lifted it high to get a better look around. Fallen timbers were all around her, forcing her to move slowly as she made her way to the stairs. After much effort, she pushed open the cellar doors and was shocked when they swung open all the way and flew off their hinges.

Anxiously, she rose from the cellar and looked around. Tears welled up in her eyes, and a sob choked her. It was as though she had just

stepped out into the open. The walls of her home were gone, along with the roof and everything it had covered. The foundations remained with only part of the floor. As she took a step forward, the floor strained under her weight.

“Children, we have to go,” she said, knowing they were not out of danger just yet.

She hurried down into the cellar and had Nicole take the lantern while she took most of Frank Junior’s weight to help him onto his feet. He cried in pain as she helped him up the stairs. The four of them went through what would have been the back door and onto solid ground. When they were a few feet away from the cabin they heard the rest of the foundation breaking up. Had they tarried a few minutes longer they would have been trapped underneath the rubble.

“Nicole, head for the road,” Susan ordered. “Frank Junior, on my back.”

“Ma, I’m too big,” he said through his tears.

“No, son. You’re not,” she assured him. She kneeled as though to give him a piggyback ride.

Once she had him secured on her back, she stood up on wobbly feet. She wasn’t sure if she would be able to make it all the way to town like this, but she knew she had to try. Nicole led the way, holding her younger brother’s hand. They didn’t say a word. They only listened to the silence around them now that the wind had passed.

Then, Susan heard the sound of someone crying in the distance. It was more than that. It was sobbing. Sobs of her own filled her chest as she realized they hadn’t been the only ones affected. The night was full of sobs as families were forced to face the fact that everything they loved was now gone.

Chapter Eleven

Edward had never heard such an angry storm. He'd just prepared to go down to the dining room for dinner. Instead, he stood at the window and looked out into the horizon. The sun was setting in the west, and a storm was gathering in the east. It seemed to be following the sun, drowning it in a sea of black clouds that had mysterious streaks of green running through them. Then, the distant lightning finally killed the sun.

A bad feeling filled Edward as he made his way downstairs. He didn't like the sight of the storm in the distance. He wasn't sure if he was even hungry as he stepped into the completely empty lobby.

"Not many guests tonight?" he asked the man behind the counter.

"Plenty of guests. They're just all over at the restaurant. No meals tonight at the inn, Mr. Finnegan," the man explained.

"No problem. I thought it would be nice to have a bit of a walk myself anyway," he replied.

"Very good, sir. Enjoy," the attendant said.

Edward took his leave and stepped out into the night. The air felt colder than it had during the day, but he didn't mind. He walked up the boardwalk toward the restaurant. Life spilled from the front doors, a mixture of light and laughter. He couldn't help but smile as he went in and found a small table to sit down at. Even on a Monday, the restaurant was busy. It took a few minutes for the server to make it over.

"What can I get you tonight?" the woman asked, her face flushed from running around the room.

"Tea or coffee. Whichever you have. Then, whatever the special is. I'm not picky," Edward answered.

"I like a man who isn't picky," she joked. Then she hurried off toward the kitchen to take care of his order.

The sound of hooves hitting the ground caught his attention. The restaurant went quiet as everyone looked toward the road and saw many Indians riding into the town, looking like shadows against the lanterns from the restaurant. They came to a stop just past the restaurant. Edward knew that the sheriff's office was right next door.

Curious, he got up from his chair and made his way to the door. A few of the other patrons followed him outside to see what was happening.

He saw Chatan dismount from his pony in one leap and step onto the porch of the sheriff's office. The sheriff came out the front door in a hurry.

Needing to get closer to hear the conversation, Edward walked along the boardwalk, past the group of twenty or so Lakota braves.

"Are you sure?" Sheriff Danny Hooten asked, rubbing his chin.

"Most sure," Chatan replied. "We've just come that way. Everything south of the road has been wiped away by the gods of wind and lightning. A war did rage on, and many families were caught in the middle. The night echoes with their cries."

"What has happened?" Edward spoke up, coming to stand next to Chatan as though reading his face would give him all the answers.

"And you are?" the sheriff demanded, narrowing his eyes at Edward.

"Just a traveler passing through town," Edward replied. "A surveyor for the railroad company."

"He ate with my family today," Chatan said. "He is a good man."

Edward greatly appreciated the chief speaking up on his behalf. The sheriff just shrugged and turned his eyes to the small crowd that had gathered. Not only the patrons of the restaurant but people from nearby businesses as well. The sight of such a large group of Lakota in town was certainly drawing everyone's attention.

"I fear that this is now a rescue mission. Every home must be searched for survivors," Danny decided. "Chatan, please lead your men to the path the tornado took. You are more adept at seeing in the dark. I will round up the townspeople and have them bring lanterns and torches."

"Let us begin," Chatan said with a nod. He mounted his pony and called out to his braves in their native language. To Edward, he looked like a general shouting orders to his soldiers. The group turned as one, like an organized military unit, and headed out of town at full gallop.

Edward remembered the dark skies he'd seen from his window. "A tornado?" he asked the sheriff.

"That's what Chatan says," the man replied with a deep sigh.

Edward immediately thought of Susan and the children. They lived south of the main road. As his heart pounded in his chest, he took a few steps back like the wind had been knocked out of him. Then he was turning and hurrying toward the livery stables as though possessed.

“Well, folks, this is the plan!” called the sheriff to the growing crowd.

Edward didn’t wait to hear what the man had decided. He had already made his decision. He had to know that Susan and the children were safe. Without even stopping to grab his coat, he ran all the way to the livery stables and arrived quite out of breath.

“Please, my horse,” Edward said as he reached the open doorway. His sudden presence spooked the groom, but the man jumped into action, clearly seeing that Edward was in a hurry.

Edward didn’t need to wait long before the groom brought out his stallion, saddled and ready to go. As he pulled himself up onto the horse, he turned to the groom and said, “Prepare the other horses. More men will be coming to go search for survivors.”

“What happened?” the man asked, walking the stallion toward the open door.

“Tornado hit south of town. The Lakota came to report much damage,” Edward quickly explained before flicking the reins hard.

The creature bolted forward, giving Edward only a moment to adjust himself. He pulled the reins in the direction they needed to go, using the stallion’s momentum to his benefit. Though the night was dark, the sky had cleared when the storm rolled away, and the moonlight was bright enough to light the path. When the road bent to the right, he followed it toward Susan’s house.

The further they went, the more Edward began to worry. The farmhouses he’d seen on the first day he’d ridden through the area with Susan were now nothing but piles of timber and stone. It was like riding through a nightmare as more of the scenery began to warp and twist before him. Nothing was as it should be. Large trenches scarred the fields as though a monster had dragged its claws against the earth before quickly disappearing.

A sound in the wind caught his attention. He pulled on the reins to slow the stallion, but the horse was reluctant to stop. He seemed as frightened as Edward felt. When he eventually coaxed the horse to stop, he listened for the sound. When he realized what he was hearing, he felt the blood drain out of his face. Someone in the distance was sobbing. The more he listened, the more certain he was that there was more than just one person.

Unsure of which direction to go first, Edward spotted a light in the distance. A single lantern hung as though in midair. It swung back and forth, carried by something he couldn’t quite see. Wondering what apparition this was, he urged his horse closer. It was only when the

lantern was about fifteen feet away from him that he saw the light illuminate Nicole's little face.

"Nicole! Susan!" he called out. He leaped from the back of his horse and ran toward the light.

"Edward?" asked a tired voice.

As he approached, he reached for the lantern that little Nicole had been holding by her side. He raised it up, shining the light on the entire family. He saw the tiredness in their eyes and the strain on Susan's white face as she carried her eldest son on her back.

"What's happened?" Edward asked. Without waiting for a reply, he put down the lantern and gathered Frank Junior into his arms.

"Careful. His left shoulder," Susan warned, sounding out of breath. "A tornado...it destroyed everything."

Hearing galloping horses in the distance, Edward looked back toward the open road and saw shadows moving in the darkness. Either Lakota Indians or the townspeople were coming to help.

"There are many more," Susan said, getting Edward's attention. "So many families need help."

"Let's get you four to town. Others are coming to help. Many of the Indians and, I am sure, most of the men in town," he reassured her.

She nodded a few times, breathing hard, then reached for the lantern and carried the light as they walked over to Edward's horse.

"Susan, can you put Nicole and Gregory in the saddle?" he asked, wondering what strength she had left after having to carry her son all this way.

"Yes," she said weakly. She put the lantern down and reached for Gregory. She struggled to get him up properly, and Edward was certain Nicole wouldn't make it. But the young girl found her footing and pulled herself into the saddle behind her brother.

"You next," Edward encouraged Susan. "The horse will carry you three without issue."

Susan didn't complain or say a word as she struggled to pull herself onto the horse and position herself in the saddle. It wouldn't be a comfortable ride, but at least they wouldn't need to walk any farther. Carefully, still carrying Frank Junior in his arms, Edward reached down for the lantern. Then he handed it up to Susan while trying to keep his balance. The boy whimpered in his arms, making Edward worried about the extent of his injuries.

When everyone was settled, they began walking. The pace was slow as Susan steered the stallion back toward the road. Edward followed at their side, walking as quickly as he could. The burden in his arms was heavy, but he wasn't going to show the strain he was under. Susan had already come this far on her own. Edward could certainly walk the remaining distance to town.

The night was filled with sounds of sadness. He could hear the groans of timbers as they shifted in a house in the distance and silently prayed no one had been trapped inside. He could hear crying in the dark expanse, and galloping hooves as Indians and townspeople rushed to rescue those who had been displaced from their homes or perhaps trapped under the wreckage. But all he could think about was getting this one family to the safety of town. He knew the morning light would reveal the devastation left by the tornado.

Chapter Twelve

Susan was struggling to understand what was happening. She was exhausted, and she was having a hard time staying awake by the time they reached town. She understood her eldest son needed immediate medical attention and her younger children needed a bed to sleep in. She needed to change out of her soiled clothes. But where would they sleep? What clothes could she possibly change into? Would there be anything for her to retrieve in the morning?

In town, they went straight to the clinic. The door was already open, and light shone from within. Susan carefully slid down from the horse, careful not to drop the lantern she was carrying. She put it down on the porch before turning back to assist her children down while Edward went straight inside with Frank Junior. Once the horse was tethered, she led her little ones into the clinic.

Susan felt as though she'd been transported into a completely different world. Every cot was full; some of the occupants lay still while others were writhing in pain. Cloth dividers stood tall between each cot, hiding the patients from one another's view to avoid causing more distress. But their feet, some bare and others in shoes, told Susan everything she needed to know.

"Susan, you sit with Frank Junior over there," Edward said, cutting through her terror. She saw her eldest son on a wooden chair by the fireplace. He looked pale in the light from the fire. "I'll take the little ones over to the hotel. I'll get them washed up and put to bed."

"Please watch over them," she pleaded with Edward, her blue eyes filling with tears. "I don't know what I'll do if anything else happens tonight."

"Don't worry," he said, pulling her into an embrace. Despite her distress, she noted how nice he smelled, the warmth of his arms, and the comfort she felt at that moment. But, too soon, he released her and took the younger children back outside.

She knew she needed to trust Edward with the care of her younger children. She forced herself to cross the lobby of the clinic and sat down next to Frank Junior. She angled her body so he could lean against her on his right shoulder. With plenty of light to see, she looked down at his arm while she cradled his head to her chest. She could tell that his left shoulder had taken a beating because it was disfigured. It hung loosely at his side, clearly damaged in some way.

"Susan?" came a strained voice. She looked up to see Gina Hooten, the

town's doctor. "What happened to Frank Junior?"

"We were in the cellar when the tornado hit. Timbers fell, and he took one to his shoulder to protect the rest of us," Susan explained, her voice cracking as tears welled up in her eyes again.

"Okay, let me take a look," Gina said. She knelt in front of Frank Junior.

Susan kept her son's face shielded with her arm and hand. Gina's apron was stained in blood, and the sleeves of her gown were rolled all the way up. Her skin was discolored by a mixture of blood and iodine. It was a gruesome sight, but the older woman seemed to handle it with ease.

"Dislocated," Gina stated after she'd finished manipulating the tender shoulder. "I can relocate the shoulder joint. It will hurt, but the sooner we do it, the better he will be. Afterward, wrap up his arm with it bent at the elbow. You know how to do a wrap to rest the arm and shoulder?"

"Yes, ma'am," Susan said even though she was terrified about what was going to happen next.

"Good. Now, hold him steady," Gina ordered with her voice stern.

As Susan wrapped both arms around Frank Junior, tears slipped down her cheeks for what seemed like the hundredth time that night. Gina moved swiftly, bracing the boy's shoulder with both hands. Then there was a sudden shift in the shoulder joint, a large cracking sound, and Frank Junior screaming out in pain. But it was done. The boy wept in Susan's arms as she held him tight, wishing it had been her and not him.

"Susan, take your boy and get some sleep," Gina said in parting. She got to her feet and hurried down the aisle of cots to the next patient. Susan knew that Gina had a few assistants, including the mayor's wife. They would clearly be busy for the rest of the night.

"Well, my boy. Let's get you into bed," she said. She led Frank Junior slowly from the clinic by his good hand and set her eyes on the inn across the way. *Just a little further*, she thought as they crossed the dark road.

~*~

"Is Frankie going to be well?" Gregory asked as Edward coaxed him into the running water of the shower stall.

"Perfectly fine," Edward assured him. "Now, use that bar of soap and

wash up just like your sister. I have a muslin shirt here on the hook for you, and your towel is right here. Don't worry about the water knobs. I'll take care of that when you're done."

Edward closed the door to the water closet attached to his bedroom at the inn. He was relieved to see that Nicole had gotten into the bed and pulled the covers over herself. She appeared to already be asleep, which he was grateful for. After shifting the candles to the dresser so the light would not bother her, he stood by the door to the water closet, making sure that Gregory didn't need any assistance.

Five minutes later the little boy emerged. He'd managed to dry himself and clothe his slim body in one of Edward's white shirts, and he'd turned the water off.

"Good job," Edward said, pleased. "Now it's time for bed."

"I don't want to sleep until Ma and Frankie get back," Gregory complained as Edward led him by the hand over to the bed.

"You must be exhausted," Edward said. He folded back the covers and helped the little boy climb in before tucking the blankets around him. "You get some sleep, and I bet your mother will be so pleased."

"I don't think Ma will ever be happy again," the boy said with a deep sigh. "It was so horrible."

When Edward saw tears in the boy's eyes, it broke his heart. He knelt beside the bed and leaned forward so he could hug the boy properly. He held the boy as he cried, and only when he had fallen asleep did he let go. He dried the boy's face with the blanket, wishing he could take away all the little one's pain.

Edward went over to the fireplace and placed a few more logs onto the fire. He wanted the room to be plenty warm so the children would sleep soundly. He wanted to go downstairs and stand at the door, waiting for any sign of Susan and Frank Junior, but he had made Susan a promise. He would watch over her children even if it was the last thing he ever did.

Wondering if he could at least call down to that attendant, he went to the door and opened it. Just as he stepped out, he saw Susan coming up the stairs, guiding Frank Junior along at a slow pace.

"Thank goodness," Edward said, rushing to their aid. He picked up the boy and quickly carried him into his room and settled him in an armchair next to the fireplace. The high back gave the boy something solid to lean back on.

Susan came into the room after him and shut the door behind her. She

kneeled next to her son and watched over him as his eyes began to close in exhaustion.

"I'll help him into the shower," Edward offered. "I have a spare muslin shirt he can use as a nightgown. The other two are already washed and in bed, sleeping."

"Thank you," Susan said, too tired to object. "Gina realigned his shoulder. Horrible to watch. The boy has been through so much tonight. I should go downstairs and inquire about a room for myself and the children."

"No," Edward said firmly. "I'll get Frank Junior washed up and in bed, then this room is yours. I'll get another room. In the morning, we can think of what needs to happen next."

Susan stood and focused her tired blue eyes on Edward. She opened her mouth to say something but then shut her lips once more. Finally, she asked, "Why are you doing this for us?"

Edward was surprised by her question. It was clear that they needed help. Why wouldn't he do his best to help them? But he understood that there were plenty of people in need. Why was he doing this for her?

"I like you, Susan," he admitted. "And I like your children. When I heard about the tornado, all I could think about was you and your family. Had anything more happened to the four of you, I would have been devastated."

Edward was surprised by the tears in his own eyes as he looked down at Susan. She nodded a few times, trying to shake off another wave of emotion. She did not fight him when he pulled her into a tight embrace. For a few moments they stayed just like that, their arms wrapped around each other, tears silently falling from their eyes. He'd never felt this way about anyone before, and he wondered if this was what love felt like.

Eventually, they parted. He knew it was improper for them to be alone in a room together, even under the present circumstances.

"I'm going to collect my things for the night, but I'll leave a shirt for Frank Junior. I'll see you in the morning," he said, walking over to the long dresser under the window.

Susan did not speak as she roused Frank Junior from his sleep and helped him stand. They went into the water closet just as Edward was finishing up. He left a shirt on top of the dresser, as promised, then put a few things that he would need for the night in a small leather

bag.

Taking his leave of the room, he made sure the door was closed tightly behind him. He hoped that the family would sleep well, that rest would eventually come despite all that they had been through. Until morning he would only be able to pray that the rest of the night would not hold any more nightmares.

He realized that there was a hum of business as he stepped off the last stair and looked around the lobby. The lanterns were lit as though it was six at night, not nearing midnight. He looked into the dining room and saw that almost every seat was occupied by very weary-looking people.

"Excuse me, Mr. Finnegan," said the young waitress as she rushed by with two large coffee pots in her hand. It looked like she was serving the exhausted patrons, who happily accepted the coffee. Edward's chest tightened as he watched it all.

Turning around, he approached the counter. The attendant, an older man, was scribbling notes on a sheet of writing paper. Edward leaned forward and quietly asked, "Are all those people the ones that lost their homes tonight?"

"Most are, yes," answered the man, looking up from his piece of paper. "Others are the townspeople who went out to help."

"I see," Edward replied, looking over his shoulder once more. "I will be needing another room for the night. I lent mine to Susan Taylor and her family. They lost their home in the tornado as well."

"Certainly, Mr. Finnegan," the man said. He turned to the wall behind him where the room keys hung. He fished one off a hook and handed it to Edward. "Same floor. Across the hallway. We can finalize the cost in the morning."

"Thank you," Edward replied.

After one more look at the results of the storm's devastation, he went upstairs to his new room. He unlocked the door then lit the candles and built a fire in the fireplace. It mirrored his room across the hallway. The only difference was the color of the quilt on the bed. But he did not care. He made quick work of washing up before changing into his nightclothes.

Edward realized how tired he was when he finally fell into bed, dragging the quilt over him as he closed his eyes. He hadn't felt so scared since he was a young boy, losing his parents and not knowing what to do. The orphanage had not been an option since it was too

crowded and there wasn't enough food to go around. Living on the streets had been a better choice for him, but his nights had been filled with fear.

As he tried desperately to fall asleep, he feared what the morning would bring. He knew that Susan and the children were safe, but how many other families had not been so lucky? How many homes had been destroyed? How many lives lost? This would surely be a night that no one in Daisy Creek would ever forget. He knew he wouldn't.

Chapter Thirteen

The morning light shining through the windows made Susan open her eyes. She lay still, nestled in the middle of a bed that smelled like Edward. She had used her body to shield Frank Junior from the two younger ones. She didn't want them accidentally rolling over in bed and hitting him. She could only imagine how much pain he was already in. She didn't want it to become worse through the course of the night.

So much has been lost in just one night, she thought to herself as she watched the sun slowly rise in the east. The sky turned purple and pink as the morning rays pierced the night, then turned a light orange before the blue finally appeared. She knew she needed to get up and find something to wear. She needed to get out of Edward's shirt and back into her clothes.

Careful not to disturb the children, she crawled out of bed and tucked the covers back around them. She could have slept the entire day away, but she knew that wasn't an option. She needed to find out what was left of her home. Had her horse survived? There were so many unanswered questions running through her mind as she went to the water closet.

After taking care of her basic needs and pulling on the dark green gown she'd been wearing the night before, now soiled from the rain and mud, she went back into the bedroom and tucked Edward's shirt in the dresser. Thinking she would need to find some sort of breakfast for the children, she combed her hands through her hair before unlocking the door and stepping into the hallway.

The morning was quiet as she went toward the stairs. She listened with all her might but couldn't hear any movement below. Perhaps she had woken before anyone else? Susan knew she had to move quickly. She wanted to be back in the room when her children woke. She would need to find some sort of cloth to wrap up Frank Junior's arm and shoulder as the doctor had suggested.

In the lobby she saw a weary attendant behind the counter. He appeared to be snoozing in his chair, and she didn't want to wake him. She peered into the dining room and was surprised to see a number of people sleeping on the floor. Mothers held their children close underneath blankets made from the white table covers. It was such an alarming sight that it took her breath.

She turned around and headed back upstairs, not wanting to disturb anyone's rest. She almost bumped into someone in the hallway. She

stepped aside quickly but then realized it was Edward. He smiled, seeming truly happy to see her.

“Are you well?” he asked.

“Yes,” she replied. “I came down to inquire about breakfast, but everyone is still sleeping.”

“It’s been a rough night,” he said. “I’m going to grab some clothes to change into, and then I’ll go to the general store to see if they’re open yet. I’ll scrounge up some breakfast for the children.”

She looked at what he was wearing and realized they were his clothes from the night before. They were covered in mud. She stepped inside the room, and he followed. He left the door open for the sake of their reputations. He went straight to the dresser and grabbed an outfit, then left.

Thinking all she could do for the moment was wait, Susan went over to the fireplace and built up a new fire. The one from the night before had burned out, and as there was a small stack of firewood beside the fireplace, she figured it wouldn’t hurt to ensure the room was warm. When she sat down in the chair next to the fire, she turned her eyes toward the children. They were still sleeping soundly. It was as though there was nothing wrong.

Susan willed the tears away once more. She knew how exhausting crying could be, and she couldn’t afford to be tired any longer. Susan had to dig down deep and find all the strength she had to get through this situation. She wasn’t sure what she would do now, but she knew that her life had once more changed forever.

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The general store was unusually busy for so early in the morning. It looked like Edward wasn’t the only one trying to get supplies. With so many families displaced by the tornado, people were trying to recover from their losses. After finding a small pouch of dried apples, he paid and quickly headed out of the madness. People were smushing themselves into the store like sardines while Christopher Wilkinson tried to keep the peace.

Edward went down the boardwalk to the tailor’s shop. He was pleased to see that the owner had opened early and the store was still empty.

“Good morning, sir,” Carter Williams greeted him, nursing a cup of coffee behind the counter. “Could I offer you a cup of coffee?”

“I would love some, actually,” Edward replied. “Were you up late with the rescue party as well?”

"I sure was," Carter said. "Might have gotten a few hours of sleep after it all. I'm not even sure if everyone has been found yet. I plan to head back out in a moment."

"Then don't worry about the coffee," Edward said. "I will make my business quick. I'm looking for clothing for a family. A woman, her daughter, and two sons."

"Right then. You're going to need coffee," Carter quipped. "Let me get Maisie from upstairs. She's already here with the children. We expect there to be plenty of work today."

"There sure will be," Edward agreed.

The tailor put his mug of coffee on the counter and made his way up the stairs. It wasn't long before Maisie came down with a mug of coffee in her hands.

"Good morning, Mr. Finnegan," she said in greeting, handing him the cup of coffee.

"Morning, ma'am. I am hoping you can help me procure some basic necessities for a family. A woman and her three children," he explained before sipping on the hot cup of coffee.

"Sure thing. Which family? I might already have their measurements."

"That would be Susan Taylor and her children," he answered.

"Ah," she said softly. "No, I don't have their measurements. Let me do a bit of guessing. If anything doesn't fit, you just let me know. Her children are twelve, ten, and eight, if I remember correctly."

"Yes, that's right," he said with a nod.

Edward stood by the counter as Maisie got to work. He watched the seamstress closely while he drank his coffee. She was truly a gift to her profession, moving thoughtfully from one part of the store to the next. There were many premade items, and she quickly found an outfit each for Susan and the three children.

"I suppose with the number of families who lost their homes, there will be an increased need for clothing," she said when she had finished her work and brought it all to the counter.

"I'm surprised that your shop hasn't already been overrun. The general store has almost been picked through," he said.

Maisie showed him each article of clothing before packaging it all up. Edward found it all very good and hoped that Susan would think the same thing. After he was told the price, he quickly finished his coffee

and paid.

“Good day to you, Mrs. Williams. Thank you for your assistance,” he said.

“Thank you, Mr. Finnegan. You’ve given me the inspiration for my work today. Making basic garments for the families in need.”

She held the door open for him, and he stepped outside. A bitter wind whipped through town, as if matters couldn’t get any worse. By the time he reached the inn, the skies had opened once more. He just hoped that whatever storm had rolled in last night wouldn’t come again.

Inside the inn, he turned and looked out the window to check on the clouds. No, these clouds were different. Normal. No danger in sight. So he made his way to the stairs hoping to give Susan something to smile about. As he passed the dining room, he saw that it was full of life once more. The families that had slept on the floor were now sitting at the tables. Several waitresses were serving coffee, water, and plenty of bread. The inn had become a haven for many.

When Edward finally made it upstairs, he knocked softly on the door instead of just opening it. Moments later, Susan cracked open the door and peered out. When she saw it was him, she opened it all the way. Upon entering the room, he was pleased to see that the children had woken. Gregory and Nicole were sitting up in bed while Frank Junior was lying very still.

“I brought some things for you,” Edward said, putting the package on the dresser. “Dried apples from the general store. I’m afraid that was all that was left. But it appears the inn is serving coffee and water downstairs. And bread. I’ll find a way to bring some up.”

He pulled the apples from his pocket and handed them to Susan. “There is also some clothing that Mrs. Williams assured me will do the job for the time being.”

“I see that it’s raining,” Susan said, gesturing out the window. “I had hoped to ride to the farm to see what was left.”

“If the rain lets up, I’ll let you take my horse,” he offered. “I don’t mind staying with the children. I bet they would love to learn how to play poker.”

A smile came to Susan’s lips, and he was pleased he could still make her laugh in such dreadful times. The children seemed to like the idea as their eyes became bright with hope.

“Frank Junior still needs a sling,” Susan said. “After we dress and eat,

I will need to fasten his arm before I can go anywhere.”

“I’ll see if I can fetch a decent breakfast from downstairs and bring up a tray. That should give everyone time to dress for the day,” he suggested.

“Very well,” Susan replied with a nod. “Thank you—for everything.” There were tears in her eyes, but she did not let them fall. She blinked her eyes to clear them. Edward wanted to hold her in his arms, but he knew it was not the right time. Instead, he simply nodded and took his leave. He would see if putting together a breakfast tray was possible with so many in need downstairs.

Chapter Fourteen

Susan couldn't believe what Edward had done. Not only did the children all have new clothing, far nicer than she'd been able to provide them in two years, but everyone was warm. She loved her new pale yellow gown made from thick cotton. His gift had even included new undergarments she thought were whiter than snow. Being in such nice clothing helped her feel better. The children seemed to perk up as well after getting dressed and eating a handful of dried apple slices.

Frank Junior was put back to bed after dressing. Susan used one of Edward's muslin shirts to make a sling for his arm. She would have to find a way to repay Edward's kindness. If he hadn't come to town when he had, she didn't know what she would have done. He was truly the miracle that she had been needing for some time.

When Edward returned to the room, he surprised them all once more. Toasted bread with jam. Sausages. Boiled eggs. A pitcher of water and two mugs of coffee. Her mouth watered at the sight as he placed the tray on top of the dresser, next to the packaging that now lay empty.

"The Clayborns are cooking up quite a feast for anyone who needs food. Mr. Tayden is downstairs, making a list of names of all the families who lost their homes. Gina Hooten has a list of everyone who lives in this area, including the Indians. They are going to compare lists to see who is still missing," Edward informed them.

"We are truly lucky," Susan said. "It could have been far worse for us."

"But it wasn't, so we must count our blessings," he said. "It will do no good to dwell on the negative."

"It is hard not to do so as I consider our future now," she said softly, not wanting the children to hear her.

"Susan, I told you we would think of something. But eat first. I have a few ideas. I'm going to go across the way to my other room and start writing. We can reconvene once everyone has had a proper meal."

Susan nodded, then started fixing her children a hearty breakfast. She had Nicole and Gregory sit in the armchairs next to the fireplace while she sat on the edge of the bed next to Frank Junior, helping him to eat. Edward disappeared once more, giving her time to get her thoughts together. She didn't know what he had planned. All she knew was that she would find a way to repay him for his kindness after this was all over.

“How are you feeling?” she asked her eldest son after he had finished eating.

“I’m tired,” he said. “My shoulder hurts a lot.”

“Do you want me to ask the doctor about getting you something for the pain?”

He nodded softly. “I didn’t want to complain, but it does hurt.”

“You shouldn’t have knocked me out of the way like you did.”

“I didn’t want to see Gregory and Nicole go through losing another parent,” he explained. “I wanted to at least save you.”

“Hush, no, my boy,” Susan said, reaching out a hand and cradling his face. She felt a sob rising in her chest, but she knew she needed to be strong. “We are all here together. That is what matters.”

He nodded, and she let her hand drop. “Now, you lie down and get some rest. I’m going to go speak with Edward about having him come to keep you all company while I go for a quick ride.”

“Don’t take long,” Frank Junior said as he slid down in the bed until he was lying on his back. Susan waited until his eyes closed before she stood.

As she finished the rest of the food and drank down one of the cups of coffee, she started to put a plan in place. She would scrape together what she could from the wreckage. Something had to be left. She remembered the ten dollars left in her coat if she could only find it. She could perhaps use that to purchase a ride in the stagecoach to Omaha. With the rest of the money she had in the bank she would find a way to get what they needed once they arrived.

When she finished eating, she collected the children’s plates and had them wash up in the water closet. Then she decided it was time to have a good talk with Nicole and Gregory.

“Now, children, I need you to listen to me. I’m going across the hallway to speak with Edward. In a few moments he’ll come to keep you company while I go on an errand. I need you to be on your best behavior and not get into any trouble. There are a lot of people downstairs, so you must stay here and out of the way.”

“Yes, Ma,” they replied in unison, both looking a little pinker in the face. She felt comfort in knowing they were safe, warm, and fed. That was all the reassurance she needed for the time being.

Susan left the room and made her way across the hallway. She knocked on the door and waited, listening to the sounds of someone

moving back a chair. Almost immediately, Edward opened the door with his fountain pen still in hand.

"I'm almost done," he said. He left the door open and returned to the writing table. "I'm writing a letter to the railroad company about my plan."

"Which is what?" she asked, curious to know what he had in mind.

"One of the key elements of building a railroad is having the workers to make it happen. Laying the timbers, hammering them into place, and laying down the iron rails the train will run on. There are many families in need. Of homes and a livelihood.

"I'm proposing to the railroad company that they hire those families who now need work and also give them the resources to rebuild their homes on their land."

Susan was speechless. It was such a brilliant idea, and it would be a miracle for those who had lost everything. She was thrilled by the idea, and she was sure she could find a way to help build the railroad as well. She could rebuild her home, and she would have a job. But then she remembered that she had already sold the farm.

"You might want to deliver that letter in person," Susan said, trying to remain positive. "Who knows how long correspondence might take, and the matter is pressing."

"That is true," he said, his face losing all expression. "I could ride back to Omaha and give my full report and urge the railroad company to approve my plan so that things can get started."

She noted how the tone in his voice had changed. It made her wonder if she had said something to offend him. "You don't sound so pleased about the idea all of a sudden," she said, stepping closer to him.

"It's not that," he said with a sigh. "I just don't want to leave. Not now."

"You were going to have to leave at some point," she reminded him.

"I suppose so," he said softly, averting his eyes and fiddling with the fountain pen in his fingers.

"Edward, what is it?" she demanded, placing her hands on her hips. "You've come up with a brilliant idea, but now you seem depressed."

"It's because I don't want to leave you and the children," he finally admitted, looking back up at her with his dark brown eyes. "I feel like I finally found someone I care about, and now I must go."

She certainly hadn't been expecting him to say that. She took a step back, recoiling from his words. Susan didn't know if she could ever give him her heart. She'd already lost one husband. She couldn't bear the idea of losing another.

"What you are capable of doing for this town outweighs us," she eventually said, raising her head. "Now, if you don't mind, I should really be going. The sooner I get out there, the sooner I can get back."

"Of course," he said, his jaw tight. She could tell that he did not like her response.

Susan stepped out of the room and made her way downstairs. The lobby felt warm, but all she could think about was finding her coat and the money in its pocket. There was plenty she hoped to find, but in her heart she carried very little hope that she would be successful.

There was a lot of activity in the dining room. Families were gathered together, supplies were being passed around, and the officials of the town were all busy. She could see the mayor taking notes in what looked to be a leather-bound ledger. The sheriff was there as well, talking to families. Gina Hooten seemed to be doing a quick look around for any injuries that might need treatment. It was truly a relief that the town was working together to help those in need.

Outside, the rain was beginning to stop and the sun was breaking through the clouds. She walked down the boardwalk, holding up the hem of her new gown as she made her way to the livery stables. The ground was very wet, and she didn't want to ruin her new dress already. When she reached the stables, she requested that Edward's stallion be brought out to her.

"Are you sure, Susan? Not that I don't believe you. It's just that a stallion is not a horse for a woman," the groom replied.

"I am sure, Marty. Just please be quick. I'm going to survey what's left of my farm and come right back to town," she explained.

"Right away," he said with a nod, turning to go do as bid.

When the stallion was brought out to her, she looked the beast right in the eyes. They seemed to have a mutual understanding, so she pulled herself into the saddle. Gathering the reins, she nudged the horse forward with her heels. Once they were out on the open roads, she urged him into a gallop.

The sun shed light on the damage the tornado had left. The ground had been dug up in the path it had taken across the landscape. Long trenches stretched far and wide, like scars. When she took the lane to

her house, she had to steer the stallion around the trenches to even get to her property. How they had managed to walk around it in the dark was a complete mystery to her.

Hers was not the only property that had been torn apart by the tornado. She saw many homes and barns strewn across the land as though a giant had picked them up and simply dropped them back down. Torn fragments were spread around like litter after a circus. She did not know how it would all be cleaned up or if anyone would want to take care of the work.

She couldn't help but think about Edward as she rode closer to her property. What he was proposing to do for the town was heroic. He wasn't doing it for personal gain. He was doing it because so many families needed help. The only thing she couldn't comprehend was why he had fallen for her. A widow with three children with no prospects or promise. But could she really ever love a man again?

When she came to her property, it was almost foreign to her. The only reason she recognized it was because she had lived there for years. She could see the foundation of the cabin and timbers sticking up from the cellar. The barn had been flattened when one side had fallen in on itself. She knew what she needed to do first.

She stayed on the stallion as she looked through the rubble. She saw clear signs that her mare had not survived the ordeal. It was a pity, really, considering how long she had been with the family. Riding back over to the house, she finally got down from the back of the stallion. She secured the reins to one of the wooden boards from the porch that now held up nothing, the roof having been blown away.

Carefully, she stepped through the rubble. Half of the floor still remained while the other half had fallen into the cellar. She looked around where her coat had been hanging on the hook by the door. Now all that was left were splinters of wood. She lifted boards and timbers, shifting them out of the way until she somehow found her green coat. At least, what was left of it. The only thing that mattered, though, was that the pocket of cash remained.

She tucked the money into the skirt of her gown, then started rummaging around to see what else she could find. The bed remained, and she knew that she would find her husband's trunk underneath it. She could try to unearth it, but what would be the point? It contained nothing but old clothing she should have donated a long time ago.

As she stood in what was left of her home, memories faded in and out. This was where her children had been born and the place they had grown into the little people they were today. It had been a home of

love and hope. Now it was reduced to nothing. There was not a thing left that was worth salvaging. All their clothing had been blown away or torn to pieces. Too dirty and torn to be mended for the hundredth time. The money she had would be used to purchase what they absolutely needed to survive until a plan could be put into place.

When the floor began to groan underneath her, Susan knew it was time to go. She hurried from what was left of the house and back to the stallion. She had found what she had wanted. It was another miracle that she had found the wet money. There was nothing left in the blown-down house. She only had the memories she would keep in her heart.

Susan took her time riding back to town. She gave herself the space to mourn properly for the loss of her home. It was much worse than just selling the property and moving away. Knowing that her home and land were destroyed hurt so much more. What if the buyer asked for his money back? She could not blame him since he would not have a home or a barn to get started farming with. She would have to prepare for that possibility as well.

Knowing that there was very little that she could do she simply returned to the town, left the stallion at the livery stables, and went into the inn. She paid little attention to the commotion around her and went straight up the stairs to the room Edward had provided. As she approached the door, she took a steadying breath. She would need to compose herself in front of the children to show that she was fine and they would all be fine.

When she opened the door, she was surprised to see Edward sitting in one of the armchairs with Gregory on his lap. The two of them had playing cards in their hands. Nicole was sitting across from them. It seemed they were playing a harmless game of go-fish. But it was the way Edward supported Gregory, as though he was his own son, that truly touched Susan's heart.

"It seems everything is well here," she said softly as she shut the door behind her. It appeared that Frank Junior was still sleeping, and she didn't want to disturb him.

"Dr. Hooten came up to check on Frank Junior. Says that his arm sling looks good," Edward said. It was as though he was giving a report rather than having a conversation. "Families are getting assigned rooms throughout the inn. There has been quite a clatter, yet he still slept through it."

"I'm glad to hear that," she replied. "Rest will be good for him."

"Indeed," Edward replied. He finished his hand, then had Gregory slide off so he could stand. "Children, it has been a pleasure playing with you. But I'm afraid I must attend to some work now. I have a big trip to plan for."

"Where are you going?" Gregory asked, his face becoming pale.

"I have to report to the railroad company that I work for," Edward explained. "I must leave right away in hopes of a railroad to Daisy Creek being approved. Then there shall be lots of work. People will have jobs, pay, and homes again."

"You mean the families who lost their homes in the tornado?" Nicole asked.

"Precisely," Edward replied with a smile. "This cannot wait any longer. Therefore, I must go swiftly."

"But I don't want you to go," Gregory protested. He got to his feet and threw his arms around Edward.

Susan was surprised by that. She stood by and watched as Edward placed an arm around him as well, hugging him tight as the little boy cried. Then, Edward knelt and hugged him properly, running his fingers through his hair.

"The world of businessmen is small. We will see each other again," Edward said. "But you do remember what we talked about. The secret?"

Gregory nodded through his tears.

"Very good, then. You take care of your family," Edward said. Then Nicole stood from her chair and embraced Edward, hugging him tight as she blinked back the tears in her eyes. Susan could hardly stand it anymore as a pain started to gather in her chest.

"Be a good girl for your mother, Nicole. You are strong like her," Edward said softly, resting his hand on her mop of hair.

"Yes, sir," she said quietly. She squeezed him tight, then let go and returned to her seat.

"Do give my best to Frank Junior when he wakes," Edward said, turning toward Susan.

"Of course," she replied, trying hard to keep her voice level. But she was afraid that it gave her away. For a moment, she thought Edward would hug her like he had the children, but he appeared to reconsider that thought. Instead, he walked past her and out the door.

It was at that moment that she realized that Edward was really going to leave. She went to the dresser and pulled open the drawers. They were already empty. He must have packed up the rest of his things while she was away. She knew she could run after him. She could tell him how much she was going to miss him. That perhaps she would see him again when they arrived in Omaha. But instead, she shut the dresser drawers and looked out onto the street below. She couldn't help but wonder if she would ever feel whole again.

Chapter Fifteen

“Edward, you have to be out of your mind,” Donaven Adams declared as he looked up from Edward’s report.

Sitting across from the mahogany desk, Edward smiled. One knee crossed over the other, his hands in his lap, and his back against the leather chair, he knew he had to think quickly to really prove his point if this was the way the owner of the Union Pacific Railroad was going to treat the matter.

“Donaven, I have never steered you wrong. Or your predecessors,” Edward stated. “That is why I have always been trusted to survey the land for this railroad. Daisy Creek has suffered a setback. The people are desperate for work to rebuild their lives. In partial exchange for their labor, build them a new home. I’m not talking about a lavish palace, but log cabins.”

“This is a gamble. You speak as though a deal has already been made,” Donaven said, leaning forward and placing his elbows on the desk.

“I did share my plan with the mayor before I left. I am certain that man would do anything to ensure a train station is placed in that town.”

Donaven rolled his eyes. “Darn that Tayden. A pain in my rear end for years,” he said. “Constant letters. Even after you arrived there. That man does not give up.”

“He believes in his town. And that the railroad would benefit the area. There is plenty of open land for the Union Pacific Railroad to make a large profit. I’ve calculated three times as much as it would cost for the railroad to be built and the labor to be arranged.”

Edward knew that he had caught Donaven’s attention then. His eyes went wide, and he looked back down at the desk and started to sift through the papers to find Edward’s calculation letter. Edward had done all the math to prove his point.

While he waited, Edward glanced around the lavish office. It was round with a navy blue carpet on the floor. Large tapestries hung from the walls, gifts from English investors. Light came in from the window that opened onto the streets of Omaha below. It was a bustling town, as always. Far noisier than Daisy Creek. He could not deny that he missed the little town very much. Or was it just a particular few people he missed?

"Fine, then," Donaven stated, looking back up from the stack of papers. "I will approve this on one condition."

"And that is?" Edward asked, feeling as though he would jump from his seat as his anxiety began to build.

"I'm giving you a promotion. You'll move from surveyor to overseer. You'll supervise this project from beginning to end, even if you have to relocate to Daisy Creek. You're going to make sure the job gets done correctly and in record time."

"Is that all?" Edward asked. A smile came to his face as he leaned forward in his chair. "And here I thought you were going to send me to Europe to advertise for these plots of land."

"Don't tempt me, Edward," Donaven said, shaking his head. "Thankfully, I already have men for that. But if this does not go according to the plan you have laid out, I'll have your head on a platter."

"I do not doubt that," Edward said as he got to his feet. The two men shook hands, and a grin finally came to Donaven's face.

"Go out there and make me a lot of money, Edward Finnegan," Donaven said in parting.

"I always do," Edward said over his shoulder as he made his way toward the door.

Edward let out a big sigh of relief as he left the office and headed down the corridor. He hurried down the flight of stairs and opened the front door. He could already hear the commotion out on the street and was dreading the idea of joining the flow and having to push his way through the crowd to get to where he needed to go.

But there was a particular bounce in his step as he walked out of the building. He was on his way back to his rooms to pack. He'd be heading down to Daisy Creek to deliver the good news. He was certain the mayor would be thrilled, perhaps even making room in his own office for Edward to work out of. That would certainly be a sight to see.

More than anything, Edward was eager to see Susan and the children. He had left so quickly he hadn't had time to talk to Susan about his feelings. She had appeared so cold to him that he had decided it would have to wait. Perhaps some time apart would prove to be a good thing. But now that it had been almost two weeks since he'd left Daisy Creek, he was eager to get back to find out what had happened since then. And to see if Susan would ever be able to return his

feelings.

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“Nicole, bring me a clean rag, please,” Susan asked her daughter. “I’m going to wipe down this water closet.”

“Mother, don’t you think that the people who are staying in this room should be doing the cleaning?” Frank Junior asked, sitting in a chair since he couldn’t be much help until his shoulder healed.

“Not everyone is in their right minds right now,” Susan explained as she accepted the rag from her daughter. “Our room is paid up until next week. Then we’ll be heading to Omaha. In the meantime, we’ll do what we can to help the Clayborns. They’re stretched thin right now.”

“Bed is made,” Gregory cheerfully declared.

“Very good, Gregory,” Susan praised him before she went into the water closet to do the hardest work.

When they finished with one room, they went onto another. Afternoons, most of the occupants were out looking for work or arranging travel to the next closest city to start over. So far, though, no one had moved away from Daisy Creek. Most were still trying to figure out how to rebuild their homes. Even if that meant taking out a loan from the bank. Susan was certain David Barber was going to make a good profit because of it all.

It was nearing dinner time, and Susan and her little family were finishing up with the rooms. Frank Junior occasionally told jokes just to distract the others from the hard work. For that, Susan would be forever grateful. As long as her family could stick together and keep laughing there had to be a way forward for them.

“Well, you three, let’s get cleaned up ourselves. Dinner will be served in the dining room soon, and you know how it’s best to be early,” Susan said. “I’ll take the cleaning buckets downstairs while you all go back to our room.”

“Yes, Ma,” the three said in unison. Frank Junior led the way while Nicole led her little brother by the hand. It warmed Susan’s heart to see them this way. Despite everything they had lost, there was still love and compassion in their hearts.

Susan took the staff staircase at the back of the building. It led her straight down to the kitchen prep area, as well as the walk-in closet for all the cleaning equipment. Leaving the dirty rags to be washed the following day, Susan then made her way to the front lobby. She

was curious to see how many families would be gathering and what meal was being served.

Out of the kindness of their hearts, the Clayborns and their wives and children had been working with a few volunteers from the community to help feed the families who had lost everything. They provided rooms for entire families to lay their heads down at night and served three meals a day. Granted, the meals were basic—often bread, water, and a small portion of cooked meat—but that didn't make them any less welcome. It wasn't much, but it was enough. People just needed to survive until they found a more permanent solution.

As she came out of the back and around the check-in counter, Susan saw that a large crowd had already gathered. She grumbled to herself for not coming down with the children sooner. She didn't care about what she ate, but she wanted the children to always have a good helping. But based on the number of people already gathered, they would be lucky to get whatever was left.

As she made her way up the stairs, she turned the corner and almost ran right into someone in her haste. She blushed deeply and quickly moved out of the way, pressing herself close to the wall.

"I'm so terribly sorry," she said, lifting her eyes to see who she almost collided with. "I shouldn't have been in such..." Her words trailed away when she realized the person she had almost run into was Edward.

"Strange how we keep bumping into each other," he teased with a bright smile on his face.

Her blush deepened as she remembered all the nights she had lain awake listening to the sounds of her children sleeping and thinking of Edward. The ways he had frustrated her and the times he had shown her true kindness. Facing him once more felt like she was dreaming.

"When did you get back into town?" she asked, pushing back a fallen strand of her dark brown hair. She couldn't imagine what she must look like with her apron dirty from the cleaning she'd been doing all day.

"Just arrived. I freshened up, and now I'm coming down to address the group downstairs," he explained. "I have some very exciting news. But I'll need my trusty secretary. You think you're up for the task on such short notice?"

At first, she didn't know what to say. A thought came to mind that she should refuse him since things had been so cold when they had last parted, but she knew that wouldn't help her situation. The more she

thought about it, the more she realized that there had to be a reason he was there now. There had to be something to the news he was going to give everyone downstairs.

“Let me gather the children, and we will be right down,” she finally stated.

“Perfect. I can’t wait to see them.”

Flustered, Susan hurried to their room. The children were all cleaned up, ready to proceed downstairs for dinner. She didn’t say a word as she went to the dresser, found the gown Edward had bought for her, and then rushed into the water closet to get cleaned up as quickly as possible.

“You well, Ma?” Frank Junior called from the other side of the door.

“Yes, darling. I’ll be out in a minute,” she called back, hoping her sudden actions weren’t scaring her children. They had already been through so much that they also didn’t need their mother falling to pieces as well.

Leaving her other garments strewn over the shower stall, she opened the door and stepped out. She’d pulled her hair back into a tight bun, wanting to make sure that it didn’t get in her way while she did whatever work Edward had in mind.

“Ma, your face is red,” Nicole stated plainly. “Are you upset?”

“No, child. Just surprised,” she admitted. “I just ran into Edward Finnegan in the hallway. Seems he’s back in town. I guess there is a big meeting happening downstairs, and he asked me to be his secretary again.”

Her children’s eyes grew large, and then they broke into bright smiles. Her heart fluttered at the sight of her happy children, but then the three of them exchanged a special look that made Susan wonder what they were up to.

“Let’s get downstairs,” Frank Junior declared.

Susan quickly followed the children as they hurried from the room. She had to tell Gregory to slow down so she could have time to shut their bedroom door and lock it before heading down with them all. There was quite a commotion in the lobby, and as they came down the stairs, Susan could see that many more people had gathered than those using the inn for temporary shelter.

“You three stay close,” Susan said. She grabbed Gregory by the hand and led the three of them into the dining room.

It didn't take long to find Edward. He was sitting next to the town's mayor, Mr. Tayden, at a long buffet table toward the back of the room. Sheriff Danny Hooten and Pastor John McBee were also there. More surprising was that Chatan was sitting with them as well. Every official had gathered at one table. She could only guess that whatever was about to happen was going to change the future of the town.

After making her way through the crowd, she eventually caught Edward's attention. He motioned for her to come forward, and a bright smile appeared on his face that made his cold, brown eyes seem to come alive.

"Hey there, kids," he said, leaning forward and resting his elbow on the white tablecloth. "Aren't you a sight for sore eyes?"

"Edward!" Gregory exclaimed, pulling away from his mother and running up to the front of the table. His older siblings soon joined him, and Susan's blush deepened.

"Well, now, we don't have much time at the moment. We'll have a chance to talk after the meeting," Edward said, gesturing around the room. "You three think you can mind your manners while your mother helps me take notes?"

"We sure can," Nicole said, folding her arms behind her back and smiling shyly.

"Good girl. Well, you three, find a place to sit. Frank Junior, be mindful of your shoulder," Edward instructed.

"Yes, sir," the eldest boy replied. He seemed just as happy to see Edward as his younger siblings were.

Susan watched her children take up spots on the floor not too far away from the buffet table, sitting with Bill Paulson and his wife and three children, then took the empty seat next to Edward.

"Well, this is what's about to happen," Edward said, leaning close and keeping his voice low as the murmuring continued in the dining room. "The railroad company approved my plan, and we need to act quickly. I have to make a list of the families who will agree to work for the company and build the railroad. Contracts have to be drafted up. And so much more. I'm going to need your help to make a list of all the families that agree."

"I can do that," Susan assured him. She wondered what work would be on offer and if she could find a position of her own. She wouldn't be able to do the hard labor, but perhaps there was something she could do. Perhaps she didn't need to leave Daisy Creek after all.

Chapter Sixteen

Edward wasn't sure what he was more excited about. Getting to share this plan with an entire town that he knew he could help. Or getting to sit next to Susan once more. He would be a fool if he tried to convince himself he hadn't missed her. Despite how they had parted, he felt a twinge in his heart every time he thought of her and her children. Now that he had all four of them in his sight once more, he felt whole again.

"Folks, settle down!" called Mr. Tayden. "I know most of you are waiting to get a bite to eat, so I'm hoping we can mix business with dinner. Tonight we have Edward Finnegan with us. As you know, he is the surveyor for the Union Pacific Railroad. He's returned to give us his report."

With that, Mr. Tayden sat back down. Edward swiftly got to his feet and turned his eyes toward the crowd. He tried to be less intimidating than he normally was when facing a group of people. After all, he had good news to deliver.

"Good evening, people of Daisy Creek. I am pleased to report that the Union Pacific Railroad has accepted my proposal for a train station to be placed within the town limits. This means a railroad will be built from the station in Omaha all the way down here to Daisy Creek, then west to the river before heading north to the main line.

"The company is willing to offer each household that volunteers to help build the railroad a modest home as well as a wage. This part of the plan was created specifically to help families who lost their homes to the tornado. It will provide a means for families to rebuild their lives.

"In the course of the evening, I will be available to answer any questions or concerns. I will be making a list of families interested in helping to build the railroad in exchange for a home on the land you already own. Groundbreaking will begin as soon as the ground thaws."

The room was silent when Edward sat down. Too many people were in shock of the news to really do anything. Then, a murmuring began as families started addressing one another. Then there was clapping as excitement finally broke out. Edward was even certain that he saw

tears of joy in the eyes of a few women. What he hadn't expected was how fast men started to come up to the table.

"Here, take my fountain pen," Edward said. He grabbed his fountain pen and some writing paper from a table behind him and handed them to Susan. She accepted the items without saying a word, ready to do as told.

While waiters and waitresses started to come from the kitchen to serve those who had gathered, Edward answered questions from men who wanted to sign up. At his side, Susan jotted down the names of the volunteers, as well as the number of people in their families.

"What's the catch?" asked Malcome Dalton, one of the oldest ranchers in Daisy Creek. His ranch had been completely wiped out by the tornado. Had he and his wife and children not been dining at the restaurant on the night of the tornado, they wouldn't have survived.

"You have to stay on with the railroad until the work is done to pay back the company building you and your family a house," Edward explained. "It's not going to be a fancy house, but it will be a home."

"I'll take anything I can get," Malcome said with a nod. "There is a wage, too?"

"Sure is," Edward confirmed. "A dollar every day you work on the railroad. Wages will be paid at the end of each week."

"And when will the house be built for my family and me?" the rancher asked, crossing his arms over his broad chest as he looked down at Edward.

"Once the reports are done, the lumber will be ordered. I expect the houses will be finished by the end of the year, but it will take at least two years for the railroad to be completed. Sooner if there are enough volunteers that people don't have to be brought in from other communities."

"Sounds like a decent plan to me," Malcome decided. "Put my name down."

"You got it," Edward replied. "Workers are expected to relocate up toward Omaha when the building begins. Camps will be created. There are still many details to work out."

"I'll be ready," Malcome assured him. He moved over to give Susan his information.

One at a time, Edward talked to every man who was interested in a job. The pay was decent, and the chance to have a house built was too

good for most to let go. Many didn't like the idea of living away from their families for an extended period, but they all understood it would be temporary. Once the railroad was built they would have to find other work.

From what Edward could predict, Daisy Creek would be transformed into a city within three years. Many new neighborhoods would be built as the Union Pacific Railroad started selling land plots to earn its money back from having to pay for both workers and new homes. That meant the population would increase dramatically. More businesses would need to open to meet the demand of the population. It was something he would have to warn Mr. Tayden and the others about later.

What Edward hadn't been expecting was the number of Indians volunteering. They did so for the white families that had lost their men in the tornado. It was the Lakota's way of showing the railroad company that they were a peaceful people and could work just as well as any white man, even if the work was quite foreign to them.

"No one can set up a camp better than a Lakota Indian," Chatan declared. "There shall be a good camp near this Omaha for all the workers." His reassurance encouraged more men to volunteer for the work.

It was late into the night before the dining room started to clear. Edward had taken over making the list of volunteers so that Susan could take care of her children. They needed to be fed and then sent off to bed. As the clock struck ten, he turned his eyes to the others at the table and saw just how tired they were.

"I think it's about time we retired for the evening," Edward said. "I don't think there is much more we can accomplish tonight."

"I'd reckon you're right," Sheriff Hooten agreed. He stood and stretched his arms over his head. "You all have a good night. I have to start figuring out a plan to provide protection for the workers."

"We can discuss safety tomorrow," Chatan said. He bid them goodnight, then left the dining room like a shadow chased by the sun.

"Good work, Edward," Mr. Tayden said, shaking his hand. "I'm proud of what you've done for this town. Are you going to be sticking around after this?"

"I am," Edward said. "That was part of the deal. I stay in Daisy Creek and oversee this process from beginning to end. I'll be building my own home here later this year."

“Going to need a lot of builders for all these new homes,” Mr. Tayden murmured.

“Might want to post an advertisement for some extra help, then,” Edward remarked, having learned enough about Daisy Creek to understand how the mayor operated.

Mr. Tayden chuckled and shook his head as he made his way out into the night. Edward walked around the room, blowing out all the candles and lanterns. He needed to get some rest after having been on the road for three days. He was exhausted after such a long night, but he expected to be just as busy in the morning.

As he made his way toward the stairs, he saw Susan coming back down. She looked tired as well, but a small smile was on her face as she took the last step before closing the distance between them.

“I was hoping to catch you before you went off to bed,” she said, gesturing to the table and chairs closest to where they were standing.

Though he wanted to fall into bed, he wasn’t going to miss an opportunity to speak with Susan. Not when he had missed her so much the past few weeks. He would feel relieved to find out how she was doing. And the children.

“It’s good to see you,” Edward said as he sat down. “I know it was a last-minute request, but I’m so glad you could help me out tonight.”

“That’s what makes me such a good secretary,” she said. “I don’t know if there are many positions open for a woman, but I’m available if you need a full-time secretary. I can even move to Omaha.”

Edward’s heart clenched in his chest as he realized the reason she had stayed awake. She didn’t want to talk to him, per se. She was just looking for a job. He felt hurt and didn’t know how to respond. So, he stuck to the facts.

“Yes, I could make use of a secretary. The Union Pacific Railroad wants me here in Daisy Creek until the railroad is complete, so it won’t be necessary to relocate you and your family,” he explained. “We can discuss the details tomorrow. You’ll have to excuse me now, Susan. I am very tired.”

Without thinking, he pushed back from the table and got to his feet. But before he could leave the dining room, Susan grabbed his hand to stop him. He didn’t want to turn around, but the longer she held his hand, the more he found himself softening toward her.

“Edward,” she said softly, coaxing him to turn around and face her. “The children were terribly happy to see you today.”

He couldn't help but smile as he rubbed his thumb over the back of her knuckles. "I was happy to see them as well...and you," he replied, looking down into her blue eyes. "I only really realized just how much I missed you four when I saw you coming toward me at the start of the meeting."

"What are you saying, Edward?" she asked, taking a step toward him so that their faces were just inches apart.

"Susan, I care about you deeply. You and your children. I have never wanted to have a relationship with a woman like I want to have with you. Even if we never have children of our own, I want to build a life together—a home, where the children will grow up and have families of their own. I want you to marry me, Susan, so that I may never feel lonely again," he explained, speaking slowly and softly so she would not misunderstand him.

He saw tears in her eyes and was afraid she was going to reject him. But then she pressed herself onto her toes, and her lips met his. Their first kiss was filled with so many promises.

"My word, I shouldn't have done that," she said, breaking the kiss just as quickly as she had initiated it. "I'm sorry. It just came over me; I am so happy."

"Is that a yes, then?" he asked, a lop-sided grin coming to his face.

"A thousand times, yes," she declared. "Oh! I can't wait to tell the children. I know they will be happy as well. But please don't be cross with them if they don't agree to call you "father"."

"I will not," he promised. He lifted his free hand and stroked her cheek. "As soon as I can have a home built, we'll plan a wedding."

"This all feels like a dream that I don't want to wake up from," she said, leaning into his touch.

"Well, I don't know about you, but I could use some sleep," he said. "But I know what you mean. You've made me very happy."

"And you me," she said, her eyes watering up once more. "If it wasn't for you bumping into my life, I wouldn't be where I am today."

"We do have a habit of doing that," he said with a smile. He pulled her into a tight embrace. After this moment of passion, he would need to be mindful of their interactions until they were properly married.

He eventually let her go, knowing it was growing later by the minute. He urged her up the stairs, wanting her to reach her room before he made his way up. It was hard to believe that he'd done it. He'd asked

Susan to marry him. And she had accepted! One day soon, he'd be a married man. Something he had been sure would never happen.

~*~

Susan lay awake in bed, trying to come to terms with it all. She lay on her back, listening to the sound of her children lightly snoring. With a smile on her face, she stared at the ceiling and watched the moonlight dancing on the crown molding. It was hard to believe that she had given her heart to another man.

She had been certain she would feel guilty if she ever agreed to marry again. Would Frank forgive her? She wasn't sure what her late husband would think, but she didn't feel the regret she had expected. She simply felt joy. She hadn't felt this way in so long that it was hard to really take it in.

A part of her was so happy she wanted to wake the children. She wanted to tell them the good news right there and then. She wanted to let them know that she would be married and they would have a house again. She was certain that the children all liked Edward enough that none of them would be upset at the idea.

In the morning, she would rise early and prepare for the day. Even though it would be Saturday, there would be plenty to do in preparation for the railroad being created. She was ready to work and plan her future with a man she truly cared about and who she knew cared about her and her children. She couldn't wait to see her children's reactions. Very soon they would all be part of a family again.

She closed her eyes and imagined what their new life would look like. A modest home out in the countryside. Close to town, but not too close. There would be plenty of food for the family, and she would never have to plan her future alone again. She would have a real partner, someone she could rely on. For the first time in a long time, she wasn't afraid of what would come. There was nothing to fear. Her heart was full, and her future was bright. She would finally be able to give her children what they deserved: a home and a father.

Chapter Seventeen

News traveled faster than a tumbleweed in a windstorm. The morning after Edward asked Susan to marry him, she began to share the happy news with those who came to speak about the railroad. And if it wasn't his bride-to-be sharing the happy news, it was the children.

"This is the best day of my life," Gregory had declared when the family had come down for breakfast. As soon as he'd said those words, he hugged Edward around the neck. The other children quickly followed suit.

When they had finished breakfast, the children were given their part of the dining room while Edward and Susan continued conducting their business. Susan kept track of all the families that wanted to be part of the building of the railroad while Edward answered countless questions. It was clear that many were interested, but they all seemed a little wary of him. As he was used to appearing intimidating, he did not take offense at any question that implied he might be setting up a scam.

"And how do I know the Union Pacific Railroad can afford all of this?" asked one man. "A dollar per person, per working day? Then the supplies on top of that? It sounds fishy to me. Like dreams spun in spider webs."

Edward couldn't help but smile at the poetry from such a burly man. "I'll be residing in town for the duration of the building of the railroad," he explained. "If the railroad company doesn't follow through with their end of the deal, you can always find me."

"I'll hold you to that, Mr. Finnegan," the man said with a nod before shifting over to Susan so she could document his information.

It was in this manner that the day progressed. When it came time to take a break, Edward sent Susan and the children on a little errand. He could tell that they were starting to get antsy. It wasn't right for children to have to sit still for so long. And with the warm day full of sunshine, a bit of exercise would do them some good, too.

"Howdy there, Edward," Sheriff Danny Hooten said in greeting, taking a seat next to Edward at the long table. "Looks like you've been busy again today."

"Sure have, Sheriff," Edward replied. He finished up the last of his notes and gestured for the next man to come forward.

"Do you have any idea how many men have signed up so far?" Danny

asked.

“At least fifty,” Edward answered quickly, not wanting to hold anyone up in line. He answered the next man’s questions before jotting down his name and the number of people in his household. Some of the men needed homes, while others just needed a better income.

“You mind sharing that report at the end of the day?” Danny asked when Edward had a moment.

“I don’t mind, Sheriff,” Edward assured him. “I know you have your part to play as well. You must be eager to put a plan into place.”

“I’m a planner,” Danny said with a nod. “I like to prepare for the worst-case scenario. That’s why those gates were built at the top and bottom parts of town. If need be, we could lock this whole town down.”

“Not a bad idea but think about the growth of Daisy Creek. If it turned into a place like Lincoln or Omaha, what would you do then?”

“You really think this town will get that big?” Danny asked when Edward had finished with the next man in line.

“Without a doubt,” Edward answered honestly. “I have seen it happen all over Iowa and Wyoming. This town has to prepare for big changes that are going to come in just this year alone.”

“And I’m sure there will be plenty of trouble along the way,” Danny stated with a sigh. He took off his Stetson and ran his fingers through his blond hair. “I best be getting back to work. See you around, Finnegan.”

Edward chuckled as the man left. He would do his best to prepare Daisy Creek for what the town would experience with getting a train station. It would be a lot of hard work to get it finished, and that was a point he was trying to make clear to every man who came to volunteer. It would be years before the first train made its way this far south. But over time the town would be forced to expand.

When Susan and the children returned, eager to tell Edward all about their trip to the general store and walk through the prairie grasses, Susan was kind enough to switch places, so he could tend to the children. Needing to stretch his legs, he followed them to the corner of the room, and they showed him what they had found.

“Flowers are starting to come up in the grasses,” Nicole stated, holding up a small orange bud.

“It’s almost as pretty as you are,” Edward said. He placed his hands on

his hips and stretched from side to side. "I look forward to seeing all the flowers blooming as it warms up."

"Mr. Wilkinson gave us all a peppermint," Gregory said in a whisper that was still loud enough for everyone to hear. He pulled open the pocket in his trousers to show Edward, then closed it back up real fast. "I'm saving mine for later."

"Don't let it sit in your pocket too long. It will get hot and start to melt," Edward warned him. "Best to eat it and be done with it. Besides, lunch will be served soon. Might not be much with so many hungry mouths to feed."

"That railroad is sure going to help a lot of people," Frank Junior stated, looking at the long line of men that was still forming. "I wish I was old enough to work on it."

"It's going to be a lot of hard work," Edward said. "Grueling hours under a hot sun. Pounding railroad spikes into the ground to stabilize the timbers and the heavy iron rails. This will be one of Daisy Creek's biggest accomplishments."

"I think that's why I want to be a part of it," Frank Junior said. "To be a part of something great."

Edward nodded, understanding what the boy meant. He, too, had wanted to become something greater than the life he was born into. Perhaps there could be some way for him to make the boy's dream come true as well. After all, getting to marry Susan and be a father figure to three amazing children was a dream come true for him.

~*~

The days became a blur for Susan. There was so much work that needed to be done for the railroad. Countless reports needed to be written. And all the while, she had to be a mother to three children. It became a juggling act, much like life on the farm had been. But she was starting to realize that she liked doing this work so much more than tilling the ground for hours with the hope that something would one day grow.

When the buyer of her farm made his appearance, they sat down together and had a long conversation over a pot of coffee. They discussed the current condition of the land, and Susan made a final decision about it.

"I know I asked for \$200 for the property, but I think \$100 will do because of the tornado damage and the wreckage that still needs to be cleared away. I've had some help clearing most of it and putting my

mare to rest. Just consider the land yours,” she explained to the young man.

“You really mean it?” he asked, hope rising in his voice.

“I sure do,” she said with a smile. “If you’re not ready to start growing, you can sign up to work for the railroad. They offer modest homes in exchange for the work and a small wage.”

“I heard about that,” the man replied. “And I think that will be a good way for me to get started. It’s going to take some getting used to, moving to this part of the state. Lots more Indians here.”

“Sure are. But nothing to be afraid of. You’ll find they’re the kindest people in the world. Very respectful,” she assured him.

After the meeting, the young man had checked himself into the inn. Not many rooms were available, with so many families displaced from their lands. But at least now there was some light at the end of the tunnel. Work would soon start, homes would be built before the end of the year, and everything would be back to normal come winter.

Though she would always be grateful for the roof over her head at the inn, Susan wanted to get back to living in a real house. In the evenings, when the children had fallen asleep and everything was quiet, Edward and Susan sat in chairs on the front porch of the inn. The night air was warm, giving signs of a wonderful spring coming soon. Together, they discussed all sorts of things.

“We should ride out and start looking for a plot of land when the children go to school tomorrow,” Edward said, holding her hand in his. From time to time, he kissed the back of her hand, causing her to giggle.

“How soon do you want to build a house?” she asked tentatively, not wanting him to feel pressured. They had agreed to take things slowly, despite the growing attraction they had for each other.

“The sooner, the better,” he replied. “You’ve been in a single room with the children for a long time. Everyone deserves space of their own.”

“So you’re thinking of a home a bit larger than my cabin?” she asked, wondering what he was thinking.

“Oh yes, my dear. Far larger,” he said. “Not as big as the house Mr. Barber or Mr. Fox have, mind you. But big enough for the five of us to be comfortable and have moments of privacy.”

She blushed deeply, grateful for the dark of the night. Even with the

lantern hanging from the rafters of the porch, she was certain he wouldn't be able to see how red her face had become. She was not a stranger to married life and understood his meaning completely.

Distracting herself with the details of the house, she allowed her heart to hope more than it had in quite some time. Anyone could look at her and think she was agreeing to marry Edward because of the money. But she would never have agreed to marry someone she wasn't deeply in love with. She had yet to know, however, whether Edward felt the same depth of love, despite the little bits of affection he liked to show her.

"Susan, the reports are almost finished," Edward said. "I will need to journey to Omaha to give the final numbers in person. It's not the sort of thing I'd want lost in the post. I was wondering if you and the children would like to come with me?"

"Really? You'd want us all to come?" she asked, surprised by the offer. "You don't think we'd just get in the way?"

"No," he said, a deep chuckle escaping his mouth. "You and the children will get to see what Daisy Creek might look like one day. And, we can look at wedding bands for the ceremony."

A smile came to her lips, the idea appealing to her greatly. Whenever they spoke about the wedding, her heart leaped for joy. She was excited for that day to come but did her best to be patient.

"I am sure the children would love it," she finally decided.

"Good. I will make the arrangements. It's a three-day journey north with few places to stop along the way."

After everything that had happened to her, it seemed that Susan would be going to Omaha after all. But she didn't have to worry about finding a place to live and a job to help support her family. She would just be a visitor, and she would be traveling with someone familiar with the area. It was much more reassuring than having to go on her own.

As they sat together, staring up at the stars that twinkled in the clear sky, she realized that having someone to rely on was something she hadn't known she needed in her life. Not only was Edward someone she could trust with her own welfare, but he was also someone who cared for her children as well. It was clear how much they all valued one another. That knowledge gave her a sense of peace that helped her sleep at night.

They would really be able to test their relationship on the trip to

Omaha. It would be hard to travel for so many days, and the city itself would probably be overwhelming at first. If they could get through the trip and still be intact she knew that they could do anything as a family.

“Sweetheart, we should head inside. It is getting late,” Edward said, pulling Susan from her thoughts.

“I suppose you are right,” she said. She let go of his hand and got to her feet. “Every day seems to bring more work.”

“I like to think of it as new opportunities. What we are doing is creating new opportunities for so many people,” he reasoned.

“I do like the way you think,” she said with a gentle laugh. She knew if it wasn’t for Edward bumping into her life, she would have never been able to survive as long as she had. He was creating new opportunities for all the families that had lost so much in the tornado. Still, he was creating an even better opportunity for her—an opportunity to love again.

Chapter Eighteen

“Ma, are we there yet?” Gregory asked from the back of the covered wagon.

“Almost,” Susan reassured him for what felt like the hundredth time that day.

A sunny sky hung overhead as they traveled the main road to Omaha. Edward was steering the team of four horses, and Susan saw a smile on his lips when she glanced at him from where she was sitting on the other side of the driver's bench. She wasn't too certain it was proper for them to travel without a chaperone, but she was a widow. It would have been different if she didn't have any children and was unmarried.

In the early afternoon of the third day of their travels, the town of Omaha came into view. The rows of grand houses with pitched roofs immediately caught Susan's attention. The three children leaned forward and rested their elbows on the driver's bench between the two adults, taking it all in as Edward artfully steered the horses into the traffic of other riders and wagons. The children all had looks of surprise on their faces.

“I never knew it was this big,” Susan said, looking at Edward. He had a bright grin on his face, clearly enjoying her surprise.

As they turned onto a wide road lined with countless shops, Susan realized just how noisy the city was. People were walking along the brick sidewalks, riding horses, and driving wagons. She hadn't seen so many people outside of the annual horse races that brought in quite a crowd to Daisy Creek. But this seemed to be just people going about their everyday business. It was all quite overwhelming.

“We'll be staying here during our time in Omaha,” Edward said. He had to raise his voice over the constant buzz of other people talking.

As Edward pulled the horses to a stop, Susan looked up at the tall building to her right. It reminded her of the inn back in Daisy Creek, but it was far grander. An attendant stepped away from the front doors and quickly greeted them.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Finnegan. Always good to see you, sir,” the man said, taking off his red woolen hat and giving Edward a quick bow.

“Good afternoon, Ivan. I would like to request a suite,” Edward said. He was holding the reins tightly in his hands in case the horses became spooked by another wagon passing by. “One with two

adjoining rooms and a water closet.”

“Of course, sir,” Ivan replied. “I can take your things inside and have another attendant take your horses and wagon to the livery stables for the night.”

“Much obliged,” Edward replied. The attendant quickly turned and hurried inside, calling to others for help.

“We get to stay here?” Nicole asked, looking up at the towering building.

“We sure do,” Edward said. “It’s my favorite hotel in town. The rooms are lovely. We’ll sleep well tonight.”

“Let’s go,” Frank Junior said. He seemed more excited than both his siblings combined.

Susan couldn’t deny that she was a little excited as well. She climbed down from the driver’s bench, went around the back of the covered wagon, and helped each child down, making sure to be mindful of Frank Junior’s shoulder. Though he could handle not having his arm in a sling, she knew it would hurt if he moved it too much.

A handful of attendants came out of the front doors and sprang into action. One took the reins from Edward, and others began collecting their trunks. Susan followed her future husband into the hotel, holding her youngest’s hand. Edward confidently went right up to the counter as though greeting an old friend. Susan tried her best to look composed despite the fact that her eyes just wanted to take in the entire place.

The floors of the lobby were a polished wood that reflected the light from the gas lamps hanging on the papered walls. Designs of cream and pale yellow danced across the walls, meeting a trim of white painted wood. A grand chandelier hung like a set of twinkling stars from the arched ceiling.

“Good to see you again, Mr. Finnegan,” said the woman behind the counter. Her curly blonde hair was pinned back from her heart-shaped face. “Always a pleasure to see you.”

Susan focused on this woman for a moment, observing her face as she looked at Edward from under full eyelashes. Never thinking she would experience the feeling, Susan realized she was jealous. She quickly looked away, trying to quash that feeling immediately.

“I’ll need the suite with two adjoining rooms,” Edward said, his voice level as always. No sign of admiration, Susan noted. “Plenty of space for my family.”

“Family?” the woman asked, finally noticing Susan. “Your sister?”

“My bride,” Edward corrected. “And my three stepchildren. Precious, aren’t they?”

“Why, yes,” stuttered the woman, her face turning pale. “Who would have thought Edward Finnegan would ever marry?”

“It took a certain woman to make me want to,” Edward said. He raised a hand and cradled Susan’s face for a moment. It was the first time he’d shown her affection in public, and she shivered with delight.

“Congratulations,” the woman chirped before turning to collect keys. She handed them to Edward without another word, then disappeared into a back room.

Susan couldn’t help but feel a little proud as she followed her future husband up the grand staircase with the children following close behind. The stairs had a wooden railing, but the steps were clearly marble. When they came to their floor, they walked down the red carpet that covered the hallway. At the very end, Edward came to a stop and unlocked a door. He pushed it open and let Susan enter first. She was completely amazed at what she saw.

“This is huge!” Gregory exclaimed. He let go of his mother’s hand to explore with his siblings.

The room was almost the same size as Susan’s cabin had been. Plush, cream-colored carpets covered the floors. The papered walls were navy, and decorated with mirrors and paintings. There was a large sitting area, a long dresser, and a wardrobe. And there were several other doors on either side of the room.

“The two doors to the right are bedrooms. The door on the left is a bedroom with a water closet next to it,” Edward explained.

“How...? Edward, how can we afford this?” she asked in a quiet voice.

“The Union Pacific Railroad affords it,” he reassured her. “The bill will go to the office, as should I. I want to be back before dinner.”

“You’re going now?” she asked, surprised.

“Yes, my dear. I wish to enjoy a good dinner this evening and then a bit of shopping in the morning before we make our way home,” he explained.

Home. That word stuck in her mind. She loved that he considered Daisy Creek their home.

“Very well,” she said with a nod. “I’m sure I can keep the children

occupied while you are out.”

“I promise I won’t be long,” he said before giving her a quick peck on the cheek and heading back out of the room.

The attendants came in and placed their trunks by the door. Then the door was shut, and Susan was left alone with the children. They were all standing with their faces pressed up against the window as they looked out over the city.

“It’s like we’re standing in a castle,” Nicole said.

“It really is,” Susan agreed, resting her hand on her daughter’s shoulder. “How about we all get washed up and changed? If we head downstairs, we might be able to find somewhere to get a bite to eat.”

“Yes! Let’s go out,” Frank Junior said, clearly excited about the idea.

While they waited for Edward to return, Susan used the time to take care of their most basic needs. They all enjoyed using the bronze bathing tub that seemed to never run out of hot water. There were several scented soaps to choose from and even a body lotion that Susan had never tried before. It all smelled quite heavenly.

Once washed up and refreshed, they went downstairs to see the rest of the hotel. There was indeed a dining room, but thinking they could do with a bit of adventure she led the children outside.

“Stay close, children. We are simply going to walk down the street to see if we can find a small café. Then we’ll come right back,” she explained.

They nodded their understanding, and they started to venture along the brick sidewalk. It was hard to move forward at times as they had to squeeze past those who had stopped to chat, but they eventually found a small café where they were able to order a few little sandwiches and a pitcher of water. Susan went as far as to order a coffee for herself. It was an enjoyable experience despite the heavy crowds.

“I’ve never seen so many people in one place before,” Nicole said after she’d finished eating. “Do you think it is like this all the time?”

“I’m afraid so,” Susan said, looking out the windows. The flow of traffic hadn’t halted for even a moment.

“Is this what Daisy Creek will turn into with the railroad?” Frank Junior asked.

“It is quite possible,” Susan replied honestly. “It won’t happen right away, but perhaps it will become a city in time. Or maybe just a large

town. We'll have to wait and see when the railroad is completed."

The children were quiet as they nibbled their small meal. When they had finished, they returned to their suite and checked out the rooms they hadn't looked at before.

"Nicole, you and I can sleep in this bedroom," Susan told her daughter. "The boys will be fine together."

"I like that idea," Nicole said happily. She walked up to the four-poster bed and ran her hands over the covers.

After finishing their exploration, they settled down in front of the windows. They took turns playing "I spy" as they watched people walk up and down the road. Susan was glad to see that her children were content, happy, and healthy. She was so relaxed that she was certain that she could fall asleep sitting in the high-backed chair, but she came to her senses when the door to the suite opened, and Edward stepped in.

"Hey, there," he called. "See, it didn't take that long."

"You were gone forever," complained Gregory, twisting in his chair by the window until he was on his knees.

"Gregory, don't kneel on the chair like that," Susan scolded him. The boy giggled in response, but he sat down properly.

"Are you all terribly hungry?" Edward asked.

"Not terribly," Frank Junior answered. "Ma took us out for sandwiches."

"Ah, braved the crowds on the streets, did you?" he asked, turning his eyes to Susan.

"We sure did. It was just for a short time. Found a nice café down the road that serves decent little sandwiches," she explained.

"So, are we going down for dinner now?" Nicole asked, eager to do something.

"Let me freshen up, and we can go down. I am sure we are in for a real treat tonight," Edward said.

When Edward had finished in the water closet, he reemerged in dark trousers and a lovely brown leather vest over his muslin shirt. Susan admired her husband-to-be for a moment before averting her eyes.

"Let's go!" Gregory said, trying to encourage everyone to get moving.

Susan chuckled and gestured to her eldest two to follow. The five of

them went down to the dining room, which was starting to fill with other guests. There was a wide range of patrons, from cowboys to businessmen in suits. Susan didn't feel too out of place in her plain dark green cotton gown. It was nothing like the fancy silk dresses that she had seen other women wearing, but she didn't care what other people thought as long as Edward was content.

"Now, children, this hotel serves many dishes you might not be familiar with," Edward said as they settled down at the table. "But I promise to make sure you all enjoy the food."

Susan picked up one of the menus and started to read through the titles and the descriptions of the dishes. She was not familiar with many of them, and some she had never even heard of before.

"I'm afraid you'll have to order for me as well," Susan confessed. "I can't make heads or tails of any of this."

"Fear not," Edward said, taking her hand in his. "Dinner should be the least of your worries. Tomorrow will be much more interesting as we make all sorts of decisions."

"If you say so," Susan replied. She squeezed his hand back. She was putting a lot of faith in Edward, and it went beyond just what they would be having for dinner.

Chapter Nineteen

Edward stood on the front porch of the house he could proudly call his own. The June sun hung overhead, bringing with it a sure sign that it was going to be a hot day. He looked out at the lane that met the road and took a deep breath. This was the day. Everything he had planned was going to come together.

He stepped off the porch and went around back to the stables. There, he saddled up his mare. She didn't compare to the stallion he had ridden for so long, but he'd been given her as a wedding gift, and she would be with his family for years to come.

Having a family of his own would take some getting used to, but it was something he was certainly looking forward to. He mounted the horse and steered her to the lane, then coaxed her into a gallop as he made his way toward town. He knew that things would be different by the end of the day. The house he'd help build had lain empty for weeks while he furnished it. By evening it would be filled with life, a real home.

The only thing that Edward missed was the presence of his parents. There would surely never be a time when their death settled well in his mind. They had been taken from him at the same time and when he was so terribly young. He simply hoped that they were watching over him from Heaven, proud of the man he had become.

When he reached Daisy Creek, the heat of the day was starting to become dense. He rode over to the church building and found a place to hitch his horse, wondering if a ceremony was going on. There were sure a lot of other horses hitched outside, and quite a few buggies and wagons as well. He walked up the steps of the church and peeked inside. Many of the pews were filled with the people he had gotten to know over the past few months in Daisy Creek. There were even a good number of Indians as well.

"Ah, there you are, Edward," Pastor McBee said in greeting, coming down the aisle to wave him inside. "Susan is already waiting in my office. I was starting to worry you weren't going to show."

"I...Are all these people here for us?" Edward asked, letting the pastor lead him by the elbow to the front of the church.

"Sure are," Pastor McBee confirmed with a chuckle. "You just stand up here with me. I'll ask Mary to go get Susan and the children."

Everything seemed to be happening so suddenly. Edward hadn't thought he was late. Besides, weddings never started on time. But now

he realized just how late he was. The town had certainly shown up for the occasion, and he had been the last one to arrive. Chuckling to himself, he folded his hands in front of him and tried to settle his nerves.

Dressed in a black suit with a black leather vest, fitted black trousers, and even black boots, he was wearing what he would normally wear to a business meeting. He'd always wanted to stand out in a crowd and show everyone he was in control of his fate, but he didn't feel like that anymore. He felt part of a community and simply wanted to look his best.

The pastor's wife returned to her spot at the front of the church only moments before the door to the pastor's office swung open. A smile came to Edward's face when he saw little Gregory come out. The boy was proud to be carrying a small leather satchel that he knew contained the wedding bands. Dressed in dark blue trousers and a freshly pressed white shirt, he was a handsome young man.

Following him was little Nicole. A shy smile filled her face, and her cheeks blushed deep red. Her eyes were on her brother in front of her as she walked. She was wearing a new gown made of baby blue cotton and carrying a small bouquet of flowers.

Next, Frank Junior stepped out of the room with his mother on his arm. Edward thought they looked wonderful together. Frank Junior was in dark blue trousers that matched his younger brother's, but he also had a light blue tie around his neck. He looked like a real gentleman. He walked his mother down the aisle, and Edward thought she looked like an angel gliding toward him as though from Heaven.

Susan wore a gown the same color as Nicole's, but it differed in the white lace that had been stitched to the hem and up the seams to the waistline. Edward had always considered her a beautiful woman, but seeing her now with her long brown hair pinned back away from her face made him feel as though he'd died and gone to Heaven to be in the presence of such an angel.

Frank Junior placed his mother's hands in Edward's, then went to stand next to his siblings, mainly to keep Gregory still through the ceremony until it came time to give the couple their rings. Edward smiled as he looked down into the shining blue eyes of his soon-to-be wife. No moment before this had prepared him for the joy he felt radiating in his chest. It was as though he would burst with happiness.

"Friends and family, we are gathered here today to witness the union of Edward Finnegan and Susan Taylor. By the glory of God, let their marriage be filled with many blessings," Pastor McBee announced.

“And when they face challenges, Lord, let their strength be found in Thee. Let us pray.”

It was almost hard to believe it was all happening. The feeling of Susan’s warm hands in his was the only thing he could know for sure was real. He kept his eyes open and locked on hers as though closing them would wake him from this dream. He felt the eyes of those in attendance focused on him and Susan. It was not the narrowed stares he felt when standing in the middle of a room of businessmen, all sizing him up like a hunter before his prey. No, this was just admiration and sincere support.

When it came time for the rings, Gregory stepped forward and handed the leather pouch to Edward. He thanked the young boy, and Frank Junior was quick to pull him back out of the way, much to the amusement of the congregation. Edward reached into the bag, pulled out the rings, and tossed the bag back to Gregory. The boy laughed loudly, clearly not having expected to get the pouch back in such a way. It was a pleasant moment of comic relief as Edward prepared himself for the next part.

“Now, repeat after me,” Pastor McBee instructed Edward. In turn, he repeated the vows clearly for all to hear as he slipped the ring onto Susan’s left hand. He wanted Susan to understand that he meant every word of his vows. He would protect her and the children for the rest of his life.

Then, Susan took her turn. Tears filled her eyes as she recited the vows and slipped the silver band onto the ring finger of his left hand. Edward could only assume that she was feeling the same pure sense of joy that he was.

“By the power vested in me by the marshal of Nebraska and by the authority of God, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride,” announced Pastor McBee.

This was the moment Edward had been waiting for. He leaned forward and drew Susan to him. Their lips met, and their kiss brought the ceremony to a close. The congregation stood and applauded.

“Let’s go eat!” Gregory called happily, and everyone laughed.

“There’s time,” Susan assured him, lacing her hand in Edward’s. “It will take a little while to even get out of the church.”

“I’ll take them over to the inn,” Frank Junior offered, gesturing toward the open side door of the church. “That way you two can take your time.”

"Just mind your manners," Susan agreed with a nod.

The children were all smiles as they headed out the door together, eager to get out of the crowded church. Edward couldn't blame them. As people came forward to congratulate the new couple, he greeted each of them, accepting their good wishes.

"You two make a lovely couple," remarked Leann Wilkinson. "I'm so happy for you, Susan. After everything you've had to live through, I am so glad to see you get your happy ending."

"Thank you, Leann," Susan replied, a blush coming to her cheeks.

"And to the savior of Daisy Creek," Leann continued, winking at Edward. "This town owes you, Edward."

"No one owes me anything," Edward assured her. "I'm simply doing my job."

"Well, I think these people would say otherwise," Leann said. She headed out of the church to where her husband and son were waiting for her.

It was not the first time Edward had heard such words used to describe him over the past few months. Work on the railroad had begun, and a good number of men had headed north to Omaha to put it all together. A number of the Lakota had gone along to teach the white man how to make a good camp. Entire families had gone just to help make meals for the workers. And Sheriff Hooten had supplied deputies to keep watch over the camp to prevent any trouble.

Closer to town, work on the new houses had started after the mayor had placed an advertisement for workers to come to town and build them. Most were simple cabins, much like the one Susan had lost, but they provided a way for families to restart their lives and finally move out of the inn. Later they could be extended or replaced with larger homes.

When the church finally cleared out, Edward led his new wife out the door and into the bright sunlight.

"I couldn't have done this without you," he told Susan, pausing for a moment to enjoy a breeze. "I never knew what I was missing in life until I met you."

"Does this mean you love me like I love you?" she teased, wrapping her arms around his waist and holding him tight.

"It does, my dear. With all my being, I love you," he declared. His heart grew larger by the second as it took in all the love he felt around

him. His life was complete. He had everything he could ever want. And he'd finally made a good name for himself and bestowed it upon the woman he loved.

Epilogue

“Just please be careful!” Susan hollered at her children as she stood on the front porch, one hand on her growing belly and the other supporting her aching back.

The only reason she had agreed to this scheme was because of her current condition. With October nearing its end, there would soon be snow on the ground. Her round stomach made it impossible for her to ride a horse safely and hard to even pull herself up onto the driver’s bench of the wagon to take her children to school.

Since Frank Junior was now thirteen and his shoulder had healed, Edward had suggested that he learn to steer a team of horses so he could use the wagon to take his siblings to school. For the past few weeks, Edward and Frank Junior had done quite a bit of practicing.

Nicole and Gregory waved back at her, both sitting close to their brother underneath a warm blanket. She had to put faith in her children, in her eldest son. In a few hours, she told herself, they would all be home again.

“I’m going to worry myself to death,” Susan muttered when she finally went back inside the house, no longer able to see her children in the distance. She shut the door firmly behind her, not wanting the heat from the fire to escape out the door. She waddled to the stone fireplace that stretched high toward the vaulted ceiling and tossed a few more logs on the blaze.

While the house was being built, Susan wasn’t privy to many of the details because Edward had wanted it to be a surprise for her. She had kept her distance, though she had been quite curious. She could have ridden out to the property to look around while he was on one of his trips north, but she stuck to her promise not to snoop. All she had known was that it would be big enough for the five of them.

That had been an understatement. Upon entering the home, there was a large sitting room with a big fireplace to the right. It was a perfect gathering place in the evenings now that it had become too cold for the children to stay out playing after school. They gathered there and told stories or read books until they couldn’t keep their eyes open any longer.

A writing desk had been placed in the corner so Edward could do his work in the evenings while still being a part of the family. Sometimes Gregory would sit there practicing his writing and pretending to be a businessman like Edward. Susan was so happy that her children had

such a good role model. Though she hadn't considered it before, she wondered which of her children might attend college. All of their minds were filled with dreams and possibilities for a bright future.

On the other side of the sitting room was a staircase that went up one level, then turned and went up to a hallway that led to the bedrooms and an upstairs water closet. Each room was magnificently designed for its occupier. Nicole had her own bedroom, where she was given the privacy a young lady needed.

The boys shared a room and seemed perfectly fine with that. Sometimes Susan would catch them up late, telling stories of the adventures of Lakota Indians. The future chief of the Lakota Indians had gifted everyone in town a copy of the book he had written, and the boys hadn't been able to put it down or stop talking about it.

There was a smaller room that would be used as a nursery for the baby she was currently carrying. That room was next to the one Edward and Susan shared, giving her quick access to her little one should it wake in the night. She still had fond memories of raising her three children and thought it would be good to have another baby in the house, even considering the years it had been since Gregory was born.

Knowing that it would be best to keep busy, Susan made her way into the fully stocked kitchen past the sitting room. There was plenty of counter space for her to prepare meals on throughout the day and a large, cast-iron stove. She opened the lower compartment to see embers still burning from the early morning when she had risen to fix the children's breakfast before they headed to town.

She stoked the fire and added a few more logs. The kitchen warmed quickly. She pulled a tin kettle from the cupboard and filled it with water from the faucet over the sink, then set it on top of the stove. She figured a nice cup of peppermint and chamomile tea would settle her nerves.

While her tea was steeping, she decided the best thing she could do was make a loaf of bread. At least then she would have something to keep an eye on, and it would be ready in time for dinner. Opening the white door to the pantry revealed all sorts of ingredients and preserved food. Jars of canned goods. Potatoes that had been freshly dug from the garden just days before. Linen-wrapped salted pork. Knowing what it had been like to have a bare pantry, her heart was full of gratitude every time she looked upon the bounty.

Gathering flour, sugar, and yeast, she started to make her loaf of bread. She stirred some sugar and milk together, then added it to the

dry ingredients. Though Edward had purchased her ceramic measuring spoons and cups, she only used them when he was home, otherwise deftly eyeing amounts. She had committed most of her recipes to memory as a child, learning all she could from her mother. One day she would pass the same recipes down to Nicole.

Once the dough had come together and been kneaded until it had a slight sheen to it, she placed it in a wooden bowl and covered it with a linen cloth so that it could rise over the next few hours. She then took her cup of tea and made her way into the sitting room, happy to rest her feet while she sipped the tea. She was warm and healthy, and she knew that her children were well.

Susan had plenty to be grateful for. Even though months had passed since marrying Edward, she knew she would never stop feeling grateful for her husband. He had shown her more kindness than any person she'd met before. And her children loved him dearly.

Though her heart was filled with love and joy toward Edward, there were still times when memories of Frank slipped into her mind. When the family was gathered around the warm fire, she remembered sitting in front of a fire with Frank. When they told stories and played games, she remembered reading stories and playing games with Frank. But now the children had grown, Edward was in their lives, and she was making new memories so the old ones wouldn't haunt her any longer.

Thinking it was best not to get lost in her thoughts, she reached for her knitting basket beside the chair. As she no longer had to mend the family's clothing, since they could now afford to take their clothes to the tailor to be mended, she had instead turned to knitting. She had her heart set on knitting a pair of socks for the baby, along with a blanket and a hat. With Christmas only two months away, she also wanted to knit everyone in the family new socks and mittens that they would be able to open on that wonderful morning.

Even though Susan had access to more money than she would ever know what to do with, she didn't feel the need to live a luxurious life. The home she lived in was grander than anything she could have imagined in her younger years. It had everything she could ever dream of, giving her plenty of comfort and ease to complete the most mundane tasks. She could spend money on new clothes for the children whenever she wanted, but she chose not to. She taught them to take care of their things as they'd always done.

The only thing that Susan spent money on was simple necessities. She felt she could breathe easily now every time she went into the general store to pick up food for the house. Having lived with so little for so

long, she was thrilled to be able to keep her family well fed and the house warm during the cold months. In her spare time she made things for her family because they meant more than just purchasing the same items in town. They were filled with her love, which was something that could never be bought.

Susan heard a horse nickering in the distance. Curious, she set her knitting needles in the basket and slowly walked to the window. Edward was riding past on his chestnut mare, heading for the stables. A bright smile filled Susan's face, but she couldn't help wondering why he was home so early.

She headed to the kitchen door, which opened onto a porch that faced the stables, and waited for her husband. He eventually came walking towards her, his hands in the pockets of his long, black coat. She smiled again when he came up onto the porch, gave her a quick kiss on the cheek, and then escorted her inside.

"You shouldn't be standing out in the cold in your condition," he said. He closed the door behind them and quickly took off his coat. "I don't want you to catch a cold."

"Edward, it is not like I am outside tilling the earth and pulling up potatoes," she said, placing her hands on her hips. "The children helped me with that a few days ago while you were gone."

"Ah, woman," he said, shaking his head. "You shall surely be the death of me. I worry about you in your condition."

"Come, Edward. Sit by the fire and get warm. You'll see for yourself I am perfectly fine and that there is no need to worry," she replied. She looped her arm in his and led him from the kitchen. "Tell me what news you have of the railroad."

"It's going better and faster than I expected," he said as he took a seat in his chair by the fireplace, directly across from Susan's high-backed armchair. "The men are all doing well. There have been none of the sicknesses that can sometimes spread through camps during the cold months. I would guess that the rails are at least halfway completed. But as soon as the snow falls, progress will halt until the spring."

"I'm sure the men's families will be happy about that. They have been working so hard for months," Susan said. "Having everyone together for the holidays will be better than the men camping out in the open all winter just to lay timbers."

"That would cause too many problems," her husband agreed.

"So what brought you home early? I wasn't expecting you for another

few days,” she asked.

He smiled and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “You won’t believe it, but Malcome Dalton has been keeping pretty good records for me. I arrived at camp, greeted all the men, and made sure they had what they needed. I expected to spend the next few days writing up my latest report for the company, but Malcome had already done it. Mind you, I still took the time to review his findings and ensure they were accurate.”

“That’s wonderful,” Susan said. “That certainly saved you a lot of time. Not that I mind your monthly visits to the camp, but that’s a nice surprise.”

“I think the men learned about your condition last time I was up there and wanted to surprise me with a way to get back home to keep an eye on you,” he teased.

“Oh, come now. I’m not incapacitated. My goodness, sending the children to school by themselves this morning instead of taking them myself was a hard task. I’ve been beside myself with worry for them,” she admitted.

“Children have to grow up eventually,” he said, now pulling off his boots. “I have to prepare a letter to the railroad company, but I can help fix lunch when I’m done.”

“Edward, that’s enough. I am quite capable,” Susan said, pointedly getting to her feet. Even though she moved slowly and carefully, she wanted to show her husband that he had nothing to worry about.

Back in the kitchen, she checked the dough to make sure it was rising nicely, then set about fixing something for lunch. Humming as she worked, she fried up some bacon and toasted a few slices of bread. Using the bacon grease, she fried up a few eggs that she topped with mustard. Though she hadn’t had mustard before visiting Omaha, she found that she liked it on most of her food. After plating it all up and adding a side of pickles, she thought it made a pretty good lunch.

She took a plate of food out to Edward, who was at his writing desk and placed it in front of him. He looked up at her, gave her a smile, and looked down at his plate with confusion crossing his face.

“Dear, you’ve put mustard on the eggs,” he said, a chuckle forming in his throat.

“I sure did,” she said, placing her hands on her growing stomach. “I’ve been craving it lately. I have been putting it on everything. But don’t worry. It is still good with the bacon and the toasted bread.”

“Next, you’ll be dipping your pickles in mustard,” he said, shaking his head as he set his paper aside and focused on his food.

“You know, that isn’t a horrible idea,” she said softly. She headed back to the kitchen for a bit more mustard for her pickles.

When she returned to the sitting room, she sat down with her plate of food and proceeded to enjoy the pungent taste of the mustard on her pickles. Though she had never craved such foods before, she knew that being with child could make women do the most unusual things. Edward certainly teased her for it, but he made sure not to hurt her feelings.

Susan spent the afternoon knitting and tidying up the house. And she was back in the kitchen, starting to fix dinner, when she heard the wheels of the wagon crunching against the ground. Her heart raced as she made her way to the front of the house and saw Frank Junior returning with both horses, the wagon, and his younger siblings. She was filled with such a feeling of relief that she couldn’t stop the tears welling up in her eyes.

“I’ll go help Frank Junior put the horses away for the night,” Edward said when he noticed how emotional his wife had become.

She nodded and dried her eyes, then went back into the kitchen. She set the kettle on the stove, knowing just what to make the children on such a cold day. They eventually came in through the back door, all chattering happily and glad to see Edward was home already.

“Pa, I wish you could have seen it! I took the horses to the livery stables just like you showed me. I made sure to pay the groom too,” Frank Junior said excitedly.

Susan was surprised for a moment. She hadn’t expected any of her children to refer to Edward as their father, but it seemed that it had developed naturally. She wasn’t going to correct the children, of course; she would let them continue in their joy of having a father figure in their life.

“I knew you could do it,” Edward replied, herding them all into the sitting room so Susan could have some peace.

Susan finished making them all mugs of hot chocolate, something she had never been able to give the children before she’d met Edward. It was a true testament to how much her life had changed. Her heart was filled with love once more, and her family was whole after all the hardships they had faced. Never would there be a day when she didn’t feel gratitude and a deep love for her husband. Not only had he rescued her and her family and offered them a wonderful, fulfilled

life, but he had also saved Daisy Creek and given the town hope for the future as well. He had surely built a railroad of love.

The End

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The Reckless Doctor's Bride: Montana Westward Brides, Book 1 Excerpt

Blurb:

She knew the West was wild. But this bride-to-be didn't expect her fate to include murder...

Irish beauty Lucy Magee fears she'll never shake her bad luck. As though to prove her right, a trip to Montana to meet a dashing doctor results in the accidental death of her coach driver. But when the mail-order bride finally sets sight on her potential husband's kind face, she's sure her fortunes have turned.

Dr. Sam Slater wants to become a good provider. And when his heart races upon meeting Lucy, he knows she's absolutely the one for him. But their first courting picnic ends in tragedy when they discover his ranch shepherd's dead body.

When Lucy begins receiving anonymous threats, she's petrified her persistent misfortune followed her to the rugged country. And despite cooperating with the sheriff, Dr. Sam comes no closer to understanding who is forcing them off the land.

Can Lucy and Sam survive the ruthless frontier and break her curse with Lady Love?

Chapter One

Lucy couldn't tear her gaze from the staring, dark eyes of the dead man. His lifeless body lay face up on the ground, dried blood staining his dingy white shirt at the neck and across his abdomen. His long, curly, deep brown hair had bits of grass stuck in it, and his tan, wide-brimmed hat lay close by, no doubt knocked off when he'd fallen to the ground after his assailant's attack.

"Lucy, go back to the buggy, and..."

The emotion-strained voice of her future husband startled her, even though he stood right next to her. "What? N-no. I'm all right. I've seen dead bodies, just not with so much blood on them. I'm not squeamish, Sam." Bile rose in her throat, despite her claim, as she watched a fly crawl across Ernie's face.

Lucy looked up when Sam's hand settled on her shoulder. "I wasn't implying that you were. I just meant that we need to go back to town to fetch Sheriff Ryder. He needs to see this before Ernie's moved. I want to get back before scavengers disturb anything, or anyone comes along and moves him or tries to steal his belongings."

Her eyes widened in disbelief. "Would someone really do that? Take his things?"

Sam's jaw tensed. "Yes. As you've seen, this land is still untamed. There are some who wouldn't think twice about stealing from a dead man."

Stifling the anger his response stirred, Lucy said, "Well, if anyone

does, I hope they have nothing but bad luck.” She looked down at Ernie with a pang of sadness and regret before returning her gaze to Sam. “I’m so sorry for your loss, Sam, and I’m sorry I didn’t get the chance to meet him.”

Sam blinked his blue eyes and swallowed hard. “Thank you, Lucy.” His voice was a trifle thick. “I know you would’ve liked each other.”

Lucy gave him a tiny smile. “I’m certain we would have.”

She followed Sam over to the buggy and waved away his assistance. Settling herself on the seat while he took up the reins, Lucy wondered who had killed Ernie and why. “Why would someone want to harm him?”

Sam’s hands tightened around the reins for a few moments and a muscle in his cheek twitched. “I don’t know, but I’m not going to rest until Ernie’s murderer is brought to justice.”

With a slap of the reins on the horse’s rump, Sam put the buggy in motion. Lucy hung on to the seat as the buggy lurched forward, her heart thudding in her chest as she realized how dangerous this unfamiliar land could be.

It felt like she’d moved to the other side of the world instead of halfway across the country. The suddenness with which her life had changed in the short space of time since she’d come to Spruce Valley, Montana, alarmed her, and she wondered whether coming here had been a good idea after all.

Two days earlier...

Why does misfortune seem to follow me around, like a dark cloud hovering over my head? It wasn’t the first time Lucy Magee had asked herself that question, and she suspected that it wouldn’t be the last.

Trudging along the muddy road, lugging one of her suitcases and her reticule, Lucy prayed that someone would come along to help her. She paused to catch her breath, a rivulet of sweat sliding down her spine as she set her suitcase down. The early June day had dawned muggy after the heavy overnight rain, and the lack of a breeze made it even hotter.

Consulting her pendant watch, Lucy groaned in frustration. According to the timepiece, she should be just arriving in Spruce Valley, Montana, to meet her prospective husband. However, her stagecoach driver had passed away while driving the conveyance about an hour

ago.

While looking at the passing scenery, Lucy had noticed that the coach had started veering off toward the edge of the road on the right. She'd leaned her head out the open window and seen that they were approaching a bend in the road. Instead of the horses turning to the left, they'd trotted straight ahead.

Leaning further out of the window, Lucy had shouted to the driver but received no response. The horses had started to turn, but not before the right-side wheels of the stagecoach had slid into the ditch and gotten mired in the muck. Although she'd been bounced around in the coach, Lucy hadn't been hurt.

Once she'd gotten her bearings, she'd alighted from the vehicle and approached the driver's box. The elderly man had been slumped over and leaning to the right. As she'd gotten closer, he'd pitched forward and fallen off the coach into the ditch.

Horried, Lucy had picked up the skirts of her powder blue traveling dress and rushed around the coach to his aid. However, as she knelt next to the man's prone form, his open, rheumy blue eyes told her that he was gone. Tears of sympathy and fear had slid down her cheeks as she'd closed his eyes with trembling fingers.

After saying a prayer for Mr. Trasker's soul, she'd taken stock of her situation. She wasn't a skilled driver, so she couldn't guide the horses to get the coach unstuck. Thinking that she might be able to ride one of them, she'd attempted to unhitch a horse. However, the scared horses wanted nothing to do with her, and she'd left them alone after one had nipped at her.

Her only other option had been to go for help. The thought of traveling alone along an unfamiliar road had filled her with trepidation, but she'd had no other choice. So, she'd chosen to take the suitcase with her most important possessions and strike out for Spruce Valley on foot.

Now, taking out her handkerchief from a dress pocket, she wiped the sweat from her face and then took a drink from the canteen she'd found in the driver's box. Her empty stomach announced that it was time for the midday meal. She'd purchased a couple of Johnnycakes that morning before they'd gotten underway, and she reached for one from her reticule.

She'd almost finished it when thunder rumbled overhead. With dismay, Lucy turned her gaze to the darkening sky and wanted to cry. Her luck just kept getting worse and worse. Gathering her things, she started hurrying along the road, determined to get as far as possible before she got soaked.

Almost six miles away, Dr. Sam Slater stood on the porch of Frost's mercantile, which doubled as the stagecoach depot in Spruce Valley. He checked his watch and his brow furrowed with deep concern. Jed Trasker was the most reliable stagecoach driver in the southeastern area of Montana Territory.

Sam knew something must've gone very wrong with Jed's run because he could count on one hand the number of times the old man had been late. Not only was he worried about Jed but also for the woman who was traveling all the way from Buffalo, New York, to marry him.

He almost used the sleeve of his white dress shirt to wipe the sweat from his brow until he remembered that it was the best shirt he owned. It had cost too much for him to ruin it with a sweat stain. The damp patches under his arms were mostly hidden by his dark brown suit vest, which he couldn't wait to shed.

Once upon a time, dressing in anything except a full suit had been unthinkable when in polite society. Of course, that had been before he'd moved to Spruce Valley from Trenton, New Jersey, three years prior in November of 1865. Montana Territory had only been signed into law one year before that, in May of 1864, by President Abraham Lincoln.

Most of the Territory was still wide open wild plains, which had appealed to Sam after all the carnage of the Civil War. As an army doctor, he'd seen more than his share of death and had gladly struck out for the frontier, craving peace and desiring to help fill a shortage of physicians in the new territory.

He fished a handkerchief from his trouser pocket, mopped his sweaty brow, and consulted his watch again. Eleven forty-four, it read. His disquiet deepened, and he sighed. A loud, rumbling growl of thunder reached him and he hoped the storm would go around Spruce Valley. They didn't need any more rain after the previous night's downpour.

After another ten minutes passed and, with no sign of the stagecoach, Sam left the store. He crossed the dirt street, his booted feet sinking into the quagmire as he walked. Upon reaching the wooden boardwalk on the other side, he made his way past the small, squat clapboard building that served as his office and headed down the street to the newly built sheriff's office.

Entering the red brick building, Sam spied Sheriff Josh Ryder, who'd been elected to office one month ago, sitting at his wooden oak desk.

Josh looked up from the journal in which he was writing and smiled. "Did you bring your bride-to-be to meet me?"

Sam barely kept himself from running a hand through his sandy blond hair as his frustration mounted. "I'm afraid not. The stage hasn't arrived yet."

Josh's coffee-brown eyes filled with surprise as he looked at the clock on the wall opposite his desk. "Jed's never been this late."

"I know. I hope they didn't have trouble with robbers or Indians," Sam commented.

Josh closed his journal and got up. "Guess we best go find out."

Two other stagecoach drivers had recently had run-ins with robbers who'd stolen their cash boxes. Josh was working on catching them, but the thieves were smart and fast, making it hard for a law enforcement staff of only one to nab them.

Spruce Valley was located squarely in Crow Indian territory and, every so often, the Indians got riled up and caused some mischief. Of course, that was usually when they were warring with their hated enemies, the Lakota. When he'd moved to the area, Sam had been surprised to find that most of the Crow Nation were friendly toward Whites.

So, although it couldn't be ruled out, Sam doubted that Jed had met up with troublemaking Crow warriors. In fact, many of the Crow in the area knew and liked the elderly man. No, something else was holding Jed up.

Sam said, "I'll go saddle Atlas and meet you back here."

"Fine by me," Josh agreed.

As soon as he stepped outside the sheriff's office, strong wind and fat drops of rain buffeted Sam, turning his mood darker. He turned down the narrow alley between the sheriff's office and the wayside inn next door. The Honeywell Inn was a small establishment, boasting only four rooms for rent, but the owner, Bill Eckert, served good food and drink. He also employed a local widow, Greta Royal, who kept the place spic-and-span.

Reaching the livery stable behind the inn where Sam boarded his horse when he was in town, Sam refused the stable boy's offer to saddle Atlas and did it himself. Swinging up on the big gray gelding's back, Sam trotted him outside and headed back to the sheriff's office.

Josh was waiting for him, already mounted on a sorrel stallion. "Nice day for a ride," he commented with a wry gesture toward the sky.

Sam smiled and shook his head as the heavens opened, releasing a

torrent. They turned their horses and headed east out of town. The bad weather on top of the missing stagecoach seemed like a bad omen to Sam. His anxiety intensified, and he urged Atlas to a faster pace. With a toss of his head, the powerful horse surged forward.

Sodden and miserable from the deluge, Lucy sat on her suitcase. Her chin propped on a palm, she sat hunched forward, her elbow resting on her knee. She watched raindrops slide down a limp lock of her black hair that had fallen in front of her face.

Her right boot was stuck in the mud a short distance away and she'd placed her bare foot on top of her left boot, which thankfully hadn't been dislodged by the sucking mud. The thunder and lightning had died away, but the downpour continued.

Having looked around, Lucy had discovered that the area through which they'd been traveling was quite remote. There'd been no roads meeting the one upon which she'd been walking. No lanes, trails, or houses in sight either. Once the evil mud had stolen her right boot, Lucy had given up, plunking her suitcase down and sitting on it to wait out the storm.

A new sound caught Lucy's attention. Looking up, she saw two men on horseback approaching her. She almost stood up, but remembered her bare foot at the last moment. Thrilled to see them, Lucy waved at them as though they were old friends she hadn't seen in months.

"Yoo-hoo! Hello!" she called to them.

Relief washed over her when the men stopped their horses close to her. It grew even stronger when she saw that one of them sported a worn badge on his rumpled black vest. Running into a lawman made her think that, perhaps, her luck was turning around.

Both men dismounted and the other one approached her with long strides. Looking over his tall, rangy form, her gaze encountered intense blue eyes set in a rather rugged face. She couldn't call him classically handsome, but she thought his strong jaw, slightly crooked nose, and high forehead were much more interesting than the more refined features of some men.

His brows drew together, and she was touched by his concerned expression.

"Hello, miss. Are you all right? Are you hurt?"

Offering him a wan smile, Lucy replied, "Other than feeling like a

drowned rat, being stuck in the mud, and stranded due to a nasty twist of fate, I'm just fine."

The smile that curved his mouth captivated Lucy. "I'm glad you're not injured, and judging by that lilting Irish accent, I'd wager that you're likely my bride-to-be. I'm Dr. Sam Slater. Am I right? Are you Miss Magee?"

Lucy's heartbeat rapped against her ribs as excitement took hold of her. "I am! 'Tis surely Providence that brought ye along just when I needed ya most."

Sam held out a hand to her. "Well, Miss Magee, the conditions may be less than desirable, but I'm still very pleased to meet you."

Lucy slipped her hand into his. "And I am thrilled to make yer acquaintance."

"Glad to hear it," Sam said. "Let's get you back to town out of this terrible weather, and you can tell me how you became stranded."

Sadness replaced Lucy's relief over being rescued and her smile slipped. "I'm sorry to tell ya that Mr. Trasker has gone to his great reward."

"Jed's dead?"

The man with Sam had asked the question, and Lucy turned her attention to him. "Aye. I believe that his heart gave out. The stage went off the road and got stuck. When I went to investigate what had gone wrong, I found him slumped in the driver's box. Then he fell off into the ditch. I went to assist him, but there was nary I could do. He was already gone, God bless his soul."

"I'm sorely grieved to hear this," the man said. "Jed was a good friend of mine."

"My condolences on yer loss, sir," Lucy responded.

His expression equally sad, Sam said, "Miss Magee, allow me to introduce you to Sheriff Josh Ryder."

Josh held out a hand to her. "Pleased to meet you, ma'am."

Lucy shook hands with him, thinking that he was also handsome in his own way. He had rather sharp features and wasn't as tall as Sam, but his brown eyes held warmth and intelligence. "Likewise, Sheriff."

Sam said, "Let's get going so we can get you settled, Miss Magee."

"Please call me Lucy," she said. "After all, we'll be married soon enough, and I don't see any need for formalities."

Sam nodded. "In that case, you must call me Sam."

"And call me Josh," the sheriff said.

Lucy smiled up at them. “Well then, Sam and Josh, I’ll be more than happy to get out of this swamp.”

She held out a hand to Sam, who easily pulled her to her feet – or her booted foot, anyway. Josh retrieved her other boot and Sam steadied her while she put it on and tied it.

“There. That’s better,” she said.

“I’ll take your suitcase and satchel, Lucy,” Josh said. “I’m sure you’ll want to ride with Sam.”

Lucy’s gaze left Josh to find Sam’s eyes, and she blushed at the twinkle in them. “Right.”

“Sam, you mount up, and I’ll help Lucy get up on that big galoot you call a horse,” Josh said.

Sam cast him a dark look. “Don’t make fun of Atlas.” He swung into the saddle. “He’s stronger than three other horses put together and twice as smart.”

Josh chuckled as he assisted Lucy onto Atlas’ back. She tried to hide her embarrassment at having to hike up her dress a little to achieve the task of mounting. It exposed a good portion of her calves and she adjusted her skirt to cover them more as soon as she was settled.

Looking down at Josh, she saw him glance away quickly, his face a little pink. She pursed her lips but said nothing. She supposed she couldn’t fault the man for a little peek, but that didn’t mean she had to like it. When she glanced at Sam, he turned around fast, but she knew he’d also been looking at her legs.

“I’ll thank the both of ye not to ogle me so,” she snapped.

“We didn’t mean to, ma’am,” Josh said. “It’s just that I’m at eye-level with your leg and I sorta couldn’t help it.”

She glared at Sam. “And what’s yer excuse?”

Lucy’s challenging tone both amused and shamed Sam. She had the right to be upset about strange men staring at her shapely calves, but he hadn’t been able to help himself. It had been a long time since he’d had the company of a woman, and Lucy was very desirable.

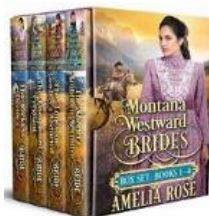
Even with her inky hair plastered to her head, her dirty dress, and a smear of mud on her right cheek, her beauty was undeniable. Her marvelous gray eyes were stormy with anger right now, and her delicate chin thrust forward in defiance, and Sam thought she was the most beautiful woman he’d ever laid eyes on.

“I was just making sure you were comfortable and couldn’t help seeing your legs since they’re right there,” he said. “I honestly didn’t mean to offend you, Lucy.”

She was quiet for a few moments and then nodded. “Very well, then. I believe ya.”

Sam smiled and turned back around. He tapped Atlas’s side with his heels and the horse broke into a trot. Lucy’s arms came around his waist and his pulse jumped at the contact. He was glad she was putting safety above shyness and he concentrated on the road ahead, shoving the way she felt against his back out of his mind as best he could.

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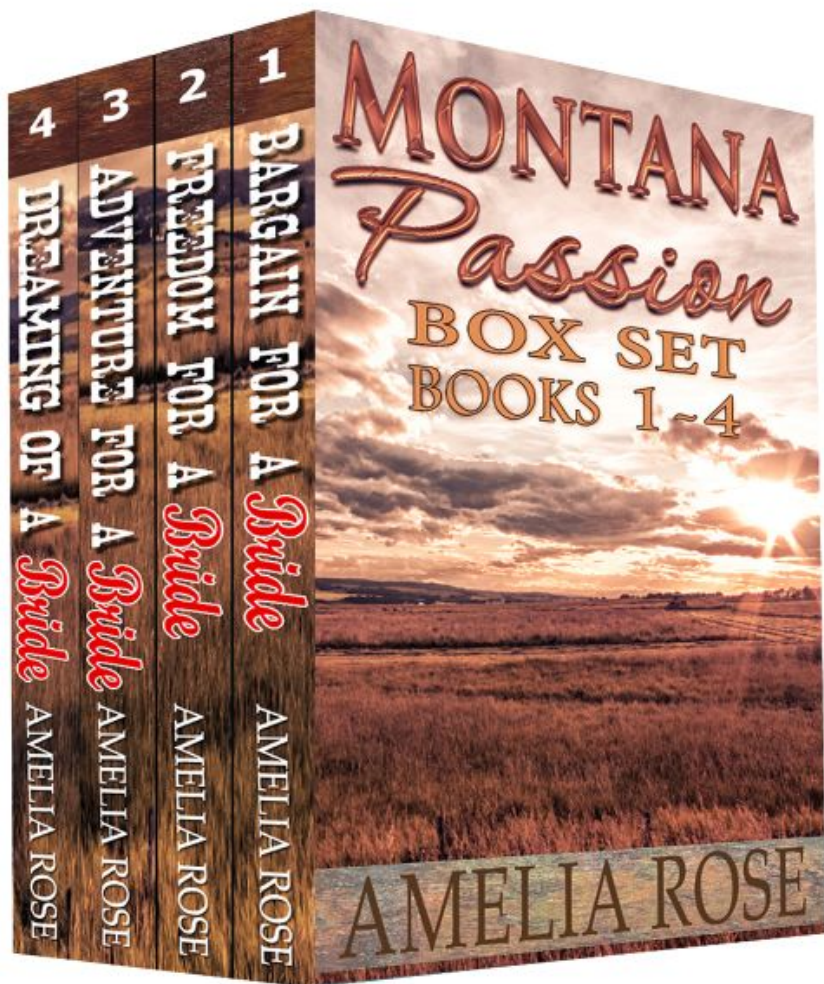
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First Printing, 2021